A Little Man
and
his World

Some Reminiscences of a
Canadian Boy to his sixth year

by

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A Little Man and his World

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Chapter 1- One Lives But Once in the World

Goethe once said that "one lives but once in the world." I have had some life and it is a large wonder I am here at all.

In the summer of 1981 I was serving as the youngest naval officer in Canada when I was severely injured while aboard ship. My injuries at sea were severe enough to nearly completely cripple me, if not rob me of my life.

The whole incident was not an accident. It was something brought on by a naval officer of Teutonic heritage from Saskatchewan, With his blue eyes and blonde hair and a giant chip on his diminuitive shoulder, this naval officer did not think much of French Canadians and was somewhat of a clusterf**k. At the time I had wondered whether he came from established Canadian stock or was a product of Canada's post war generosity towards former P.O.W.'s and D.P.'s

What's a clusterf**k? Well you have probably already heard the term FUBAR – fouled up beyond all recovery. Well past FUBAR is a f**k, a person who is all FUBARed and can't help themselves.

You may think that f**k is a crude word but it is in fact a naval term – Fornication Under Consent of the King. And the famous hand signal, well that's how sailors communicated with the Jolly Molly's lining the piers as the ship pulled up along side. Point with one finger, negotiate with the other. After months at sea could you blame the

Jolly tars from wanting to get on with life's pleasure ashore? Where we have it wrong today with the hand signal I will let you figure it out.

Well past f**k, you guessed it is a clusterf**k, someone who is past FUBARed … can't help themselves and … doesn't give a damn about the harm and suffering they may cause others. Pretty crude … but appropriate.

In 1981 I was serving aboard one of Her Majesty's Canadian Ships with some junior officers from Quebec, a frigate in fact, and watched as this clusterf**k of an officer set my colleagues at risk.

One of the junior officers had already broken his wrist (an English speaking chap from Ontario) because of this clusterf**k. To protect my French Canadian colleagues I deliberately placed myself between the clusterf**k and them.

My mother is French Canadian and so I grew up enjoying the best of the two solitudes in Canada. Well, the clusterf**k hated me even more than he hated my French Canadian colleagues, me being sort of half good and half bad in his Teutonic measure.

During a jack stay transfer, when we were sending a man over from HMCS Qu'Appelle to another frigate, the clusterf**k got at it and nearly cost the man his life. Ironically the man put at risk was the same chap who had broken his wrist and was still in his cast. I had to act and in doing so I damaged my neck, spine and hip.

Many years later we would discover that I had in fact broken my neck in 1981 and had lived nearly three decades with this injury.

By a supreme stroke of irony, perhaps God's First remarkable gift to me, I was saved by the first trauma I ever experienced, my entrance into the world, which was slow and painful for all parties involved.

The ol' doctor overseeing my delivery had to put a little English into his work and ushered me into the world with such force that the soft and malleable bones of my upper spine were squeezed and pulled into a rather own unique shape.

Any mother who has delivered a child knows that short journey is the longest journey of their child's life. We are all pliable beyond words, for it we weren't there would be no continuity to our species. So much child and so little space! Push … pull … push … pull … rather remarkable don't you think.

For the first few weeks of life I could not turn my head and while growing up I had stiffness with my neck and spine. Now as I grow older and have endured wear and tear, I have more stiffness and yes more pain. For me Life is indeed a pain in the neck.

Two decades later, the severity of the trauma of my sea borne injury would be mitigated by the remnants of my injurious entry into the

world. Two wrongs very seldom made a right but in my case they did and I am still here. But I am getting ahead of myself.

I am the second of four children from a Canadian Catholic family. I grew up in Western Canada in the best of all Canadian worlds, with a French Canadian Mother and a Canadian Father with a mixed Scottish and Polish Heritage. Bruskiewich in fact means "son of Bruce". I am ultimately a member of the Bruce Clan and am related to Michael of Bruce, who fought alongside the Englishman Wellington against the French during the Napoleonic.

After Napoleon was defeated, the second time, Michael of Bruce was asked to remain in central Europe to help cement the peace forged by the Congress of Vienna. That part of central Europe would change hands several times ending up part of modern day Poland.

My mother side of the family sports at least one of Napoleon's Famous Generals. Small world. The two solitudes that once made up Canada, the English and the French, have never been far apart in our home, they are embraced.

Some of my earliest remembrance helped to shape my perspective to the world. For instance, it was August 1965 that I vividly remember my first real image as a child.

I was just a few weeks past my fourth birthday and was I happy cocooned in the warmth and familiarity of our solarium on a bright

and sunny summer day, not a care in the world, and naïve as one can imagine for such a young boy when the door bell rang.

It was the middle of the afternoon and I instinctively knew we were not expecting visitors.

My mother hurried from the kitchen where she had already begun to make our family's dinner to answer the door, not all that happy with the distraction (she had three very young children underfoot). I followed my mother to the door,

When she answered the door it was a taxi driver delivering an urgent telegram. I overheard that it was a telegram about my uncle Claude, my mother's youngest brother.

My uncle Claude had just been married three weeks and I suspected that my mother was expecting some happy tidings about a baby or something. Claude was my godfather.

The telegram was opened and read and in the blink of an eye everything changed for ever. My mother began to cry uncontrollably and quickly closed the front door. She ran past us for the comfort and solitude of her bedroom. We three kids knew not to follow her, but to quietly wait for our father to return home, summoned hurriedly from work.

When my father returned home he too sought the comfort and solitude of their bedroom and we three children were left unknowing and quite agitated until my father came out of their bedroom to tell us the news.

My uncle, and godfather had died in a tragic accident “while serving overseas in France with the RCAF and NATO.”

Death for a four year old is an abstraction, as is a far off place like France, and acronyms like RCAF and NATO. These were grown up things and as I listened to my father’s simple explanation I decided I needed to find out what these things meant so I could better understand grown up things …

We tried the best not to get underfoot while my parents sorted out what to do next. My mother could not stop crying. Claude was the youngest of a close group of seven. Now there were only six.

When we are children we are in such a hurry to grow up. Later when we are adults we wish we could go back to being children again. Based on my life’s experiences I have always been a firm believer to let children remain children for as long as possible and that we should protect them as best as we can from the evil and turmoil of the world. Ignorance is bliss and childhood the most blissful state of ignorance.

He was dead, Il est mort, my mother kept repeating over and over in French. If my god father was dead I knew for certain he would have a funeral.

Earlier in 1965 I had watched on our old black and white Philips Television the pomp and ceremony of the state funeral of Winston Churchill. I went to my room and began to decide what I would need to take with me to my uncle's funeral in France.

Later that evening I was somewhat disappointed when I was told we would not being going and that we would miss the pomp and ceremony of my uncle's funeral in France. France didn't seem so far away when you looked at a map. Yet even today I have yet to visit that part of the continent of Europe.

The adults were quickly at work. Arrangements would be made with the Government of France to allow an honour guard of RCAF personnel to march and bury my godfather at Choloy military cemetery near Nancy, in France.

My maternal grandfather's brother, Charles August St. Arnaud, would ask his old wartime friend Charles de Gaule, President of France, to permit a more than dignified burial.

I was later told that French soldiers were present as a guard of honour and would bear witness to the entire RCAF wing in full dress uniforms as they marched to the Choloy cemetery in precision ranks,

marching to the cadence of the Colonel Boogie March. Oh, perhaps I should tell you that my father was then a Wing Commander RCAF, a rank he has long retired from.

Tears still come to my eyes when I hear the Colonel Boogie March. I think of my uncle and the life and family that would never be.

His widow Peggy would marry three times but never forget her first, true love. Claude was a handsome, dashing young man, almost Romanesque in his visage. Heston and Douglas had nothing on my Uncle Claude. His sudden and unexpected loss is a reminder that we should live like there is no tomorrow, nor should we forget what Goethe had to say of life, "one lives but once in the world."

A Godfather is there to watch over and protect their Godchild. While he has not been here in body, my Uncle Claude has always been here in spirit, in my heart and in my actions. I have kept my faith with him and all like him. I think I have earned the right to say that I have done him and his memory proud.

The beginning of my adult journey in life began when I was four years old and witnessed the delivery of that sad telegram in the summer of 1965. It is the only time I have ever seen my mother cry.

My journey will end when someone plays the Colonel Boogie March at my funeral.

Chapter 2 – Churchill and Never Give In

Winston Churchill once said "*Never Give In*." He probably said it more than once, but you understand what I mean. And he was probably smoking one of his legendary cigars when professing to this ultimate gall.

In the summer of 1940 the Nazis controlled the rest of Europe and at the United Kingdom's Darkest Hour, Ol' Winston ventured forth to chide the British … *Stay Calm and Carry On*! The whole history played out on television for the young like me to see.

In the fall of 1965, some months after Winston Churchill's televised state funeral, in my quest to better understand the man and his legend, my mother caught me serendipitously smoking one of my father's Churchillian cigars.

Why crawl when you can walk … hell why walk when you can sprint through life.

Supposedly I was greener than fresh grass clippings when my mother finally jimmied open the bathroom door and vented her retribution. She broke her prized hair brush that day and I can recall not being able to sit for at least a fortnight.

“Just wait till your father gets home” she threatened. At the time, “*Never Give In*” seemed like good words to live by.

All I could think about as I fought back the tears, and rub by raw backside, was how long I would have to save my precious pennies to pay for the expensive cigar I had just enjoyed … well maybe not enjoyed, but endured. I had asthma as a boy, and in retrospect smoking a stinky cigar was not a good idea for a boy with asthma.

You are probably also a little intrigued as to how my maternal grandfather’s brother would be on close and personal terms with the legendary Charles de Gaule, President of France.

Well Uncle Charles August St. Arnaud would be Queen’s Printer in Ottawa in Centennial year 1967. Before the war he was a journalist in London and in Paris and during the war he did special service for the Crown.

His story and that of his friendship to luminaries like Winston Churchill and Charles President of France will be told … but all in due time, and perhaps in another set of stories.

Winston was right … Stay Calm, Carry On … and Never Give in!

Chapter 3 – The Summer of ‘65

The summer of 1965 was the summer that American astronaut Ed White would do his walk in space. I remember being glued to the screen of our old Philips Black and White TV as commentator Ed Cronkite walked us earthlings through the heady and complicated process of “extravehicular egress and ingress” from a Gemini space capsule.

Every time he said those technical words came up I would repeat them. By dinner time that day I was a bona fide space cadet, with my own vernacular.

The fiction of space flight has never excited me half as much as the realities of space flight. In 1985 I would meet astronaut John Young just by chance while he arrived at a high technology company I was working with in Richmond, BC.

Here was a genuine American hero who had walked on the moon and piloted the Space Shuttle and all I could venture to do at the spur of the moment was to ask him about his 1965 flight on Gemini. In retrospect he didn’t seem to mind.

In actual fact John Young enjoyed my questions and would have talked with me much longer were he not stolen away by the CFO of

the company. The CFO was waiting impatiently for the man and here I was “wasting his time.”

This bean counter would never forgive my imprudence because John Young would later say to the Company’s CEO how much he enjoyed his chat with little old me (then at the lowest rung of this corporation’s ladder} and how he could not remember the first name of the man at the top the CFO (another John by the way).

Sure, astronaut John Young was in town to talk synthetic aperture radar and Shuttle, but he is a gentleman and like all gentlemen he did not take to rudeness.

After the visit on a shuttle flight, a shuttle crew would use the Canadian made synthetic aperture radar system to discover the mid-Americas rift, a nearly subterranean crack that runs diagonally across North America and divides the continent, no pun intended.

They would also be taking special SAR pictures of ships at sea, both afloat and submerged. The surface stuff is kind of obvious, but the sub surface stuff, well that is kind of secret stuff, and so … “if you don’t ask I won’t have to lead you astray.”

In 1985 I would also briefly meet and then a year later in 1986 mourn the loss of Astronaut Sally Ride in the Challenger Disaster.

My immediate assessment of the spring 1986 Challenger launch failure, literally moments after its occurrence, would make me a legend amongst some of the technology wizards in and around Vancouver.

Years later, during a visit to the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, I was nearly overcome with nostalgia as I looked up at a Gemini capsule in the technology gallery. It might even have been either White or Young's Gemini.

I think the day that White took his walk around the earth is the day I became hooked on science and technology. I would also find that time and interest would provide me a unique understanding of space related technology, including the potential of synthetic aperture satellites and space based reconnaissance.

Purposively my unique vernacular has not changed much over the past four decades. I am proud to be a good child of the 1960's, born at the tail end of the baby boomers and not a spoiled and selfish one.

There is a funny story of some 21st century youngsters chiding an older 20th century man how out of date he was since he didn't use cell phones, Blackberries, Twitters and the like.

The older man pauses to think for a moment before wisely responding … "in my generation we invented and perfected the computer, jet aircraft, the interplanetary rocket, satellite, modern medicine, colour

television, the internet and the like … what has your generation brought into the world?"

I don't mind saying I don't even own a cell phone and it has been ages since I have even worn a wristwatch. I find modern technology impersonal and frankly boring. But yet I am knowledgeable of science and technology just selective on how I wish science and technology to intrude into my life. Give me a slide rule and I can add or subtract logarithms.

Most kids of my generation read either the Hardy Boys or Nancy Drew when they grew up. I read Tom Swift. If you never heard of Tom Swift and his gadgets then you are safe to be let loose on the world.

If you are a Tom Swift affiliate then you are a techno nerd and Quantum Field Theory might be your middle name. In a whisper I will admit to you I still sneak a peek at some of the Tom Swift books in my library. I only recently set them onto a new reader, something I regret as I write these words. Nostalgia … nostalgia.

I have already mentioned that my father was a RCAF Wing Commander when I was a youngster. In fact he started his fifty-five year career in mechanical engineering in 1956 as a twenty some aeronautical engineer with a hands-on understanding of high performance jet engines and aircraft. A few years ago, we were finally happy he had retired to more relaxing pursuits.

In 1965 just an hour's drive north from our home was an RCAF airbase which we ventured to visit on public holidays and special event days. Long before cars had begun to elicit an interest in me I had already kicked the tires of sub-sonic CF-100 Canucks, and supersonic CF-104 Starfighter and Voodoo interceptors.

I could also not but stop and admire the old Mosquito aircraft mounted on a pedestal and the entrance of the air base. There is something awe inspiring about a high performance aircraft made out of plywood that could out fly all but the German's Me-262 jet aircraft and Me-163 rocket planes of the Second World War.

The "*Mossie*" as the Mosquito was affectionately called by its pilots would be the first "stealth plane", and would inspire a secret German response, the Horten series of flying wings which were in their development phase in the closing months of the war.

The thrill of seeing a low level sortie of a gaggle of two CF-104 Starfighters on *Battle of Britain Day* in September 1965 marked another right of passage for this young boy.

I could swear the two aircraft flew right over our house by how their passage rattled the floorboards. In an instant they were gone, leaving but a trail of combusted JP fuel to mark their over flight.

I knew Winston Churchill had something to do with the Battle for Britain and "*Never Giving In*". Now I was convinced more then ever that this Churchill fellow was a person I would have to get to know better. Later that day was my escapade with the cigar.

Cigars, planes, rockets and loud noises, what else would a young boy want? If only I could read. Point me to a "jardin d'enfant" (French for the German word Kindergarten) or at the very least to a well stocked public library.

There was a branch of the public library up the road at Capilano Mall. So began my love of books, libraries and librarians. Even today some of my best friends are librarians. I prefer sitting and working in a library to sitting and working at home alone or in a coffee shop surrounded by gossip gollies.

I would even go onto marry a librarian for a long twelve years of my middle life before irreconcilable indifference on her part would bring our marriage to a heart breaking end. Yes I know what you are thinking … I wanted she didn't. A sad chapter now closed.

For a five year old pictures were a good place to start and I remember in perhaps the spring of 1966 coming across a picture of a young boy sitting on the remnants of his house during "*The Blitz*" in London in a book about the Life and Times of Winston Churchill. Blitz was now added to my vernacular.

The boy in the picture was about the same age as I was when I came across his picture in the book. I remember thinking how sad he looked. In 1966 when I sat at the little table to look at the pictures and then had got up and had asked the Librarian to tell me what the words were under the picture she felt then as I do now that ignorance is bliss in childhood and she told me that the little boy had lost his toys and was sad as a result. Poor little Boy was all I could think. Somehow my sixth sense told me there was much more going on in the picture.

When I again came across the same picture some years later, this time being able to read the captions, I would find that the boy was sad not merely because he had lost his toys, but his parents and his house as well to the German bombs and the Blitz. His mother and father were in fact dead and buried under the very debris that he was sitting on. His look was one of shock, bewilderment and disbelief.

God bless that kind Librarian. I remember she had kind eyes and strawberry blonde hair and always smiled. This kind lady would make it fun to be dropped off at the library in the Mall while my mother took my older brother and younger sister shopping with her.

I was the bookish type. I could be amused for hours looking at the pictures in the books and took to taking books off the first two tiers of the shelved hither and there in the library if only to search for good pictures. As long as I picked up after myself, something that I would

do just to please this strawberry blonde guardian angel, I had the run of the place.

When she had a moment she would read a passage or two to me or teach me a word or two. I was already quite good with my alphabet.

She also taught me how to spell my name. With that skill and knowledge I think I became a real person. When a child learns to write their name is a banner day for their journey though live. We should throw the child a party!

We do not have a choice as to when we enter this world, and so a birthday is a sort of throw away. We do have a say when we write our name for the first time. That's a conscious achievement.

Spoken words disappear, written ones do not. Something that has a written word is real. A sound is ethereal. Eventually my mother would have a hard time dragging me away from my second home and would begin to let me take some books home with me.

The children's library card that the Library issued me was pink and precious. As life will eventually teach me, everything pink was precious, in one way, shape or form.

Pictures were no longer enough. Evidently it was now time for me to learn how to read for myself.

Chapter 4 – Death be Not Proud

My fifth year was a hiatus of sort. I would try, honestly I would, to keep myself out of trouble and busy around the rental duplex that we lived in.

In truth I was somewhat bored. I wanted to go to school. A brother nearly a year older than I was in first grade and I had a sister a year younger than me who took up all my mother's spare time and energy.

Television just wasn't a distraction like it is today. Then we had two channels, the TV was black and white and yes even colour TV and cable had yet to find there way into the home. It will still be three or four years in the future before they arrived. Ah the 1960's … life was so much simpler then!

When my mother wasn't looking I might go next door to visit a neighbour or venture further up the street and follow my brother to St. Bride's Elementary school. Inevitably when I did that the Principal would sweep me up and my mother would have to make the trek up the street to take me home, youngest child at hand.

My mother had been an elementary school teacher before she was married, but that would not assuage her annoyance on my escapades to the school. I would be dragged home and told to expect punishment.

Being locked in my room wasn't much of a punishment because there wasn't much else to do to begin with. If I had some good books or someone to play with then I would be upset locked away in my cell.

One day out of sheer ennui I decide to draw on the wall with my crayons. Yup, you guessed it, wax crayons! I drew a nice work of art but that didn't go over well, and despite scrubbing the walls for several days and at least three layers of paint afterwards, you could sill make out the Rembrandt weeks afterwards. It was good I was standing … 'cause sitting was a bit uncomfortable for that week!

To be punished meant that something was taken away, a privilege or something. But frankly we were so poor then and spread so thin with a young and growing family that ennui became my middle name. I took to learning how to fold paper airplanes and when the paper ran out I took to unfolding the paper airplanes, re-using the paper and trying new designs.

Even today I admire a good fold on paper and something that travels steadily and over long distance through the air. I once launched a trusty design out of the window of my parent's old apartment on the 28th floor of a building in the West End of Vancouver and it sailed up the street and was still airborne six minutes into its flight, carried forever upwards until it sailed out of sight. I think it travelled well over a kilometre.

I also took to exploring. My neighbour was a girl my age. She was an only child and fun to play with. We shared an interest in look at pictures in picture books.

I know she enjoyed the company. I remember her pleasant smile and her giggle, and her blue eyes and her curly hair, which made up for a sister who only always seemed to pout and cry.

My neighbour restored my faith in girls for until then I thought them to be surly, unruly and unhappy creatures. She too, like me, could not wait to enter first grade. But sadly she would not make it.

One day my friend would be away in the hospital for a week and when she came home I could sense that something was amiss. But neither she nor her parents would say what.

A gray and billowing cloud sailed over her until with time the cloud turned more ominous and foreboding. She would be short of breath or be nauseous. She also had to be careful and stay in doors.

I sensed something was very wrong. She now spent more and more time in bed having to take medicines and stay out of the direct sun. A once energetic and happy friend now had neither energy nor joy.

One day I snuck over to see her, crawling up through the window. She was asleep. I thought my prized stuff bear would bring her good luck and tucked it into bed beside her.

She took it with her to the hospital the following day and died of childhood leukemia later that month. She never came home.

I think I visited her only once at the hospital a few days before the end. She insisted that I be allowed to come. She wanted to give me a hug and thanked me for letting her "borrow my teddy bear." She said "don't worry, I'll be fine". Being a naïve optimist I wanted to believe her. She hugged the teddy bear and wave when I left. After I left she had closed her eyes, never to open them again.

The time between her diagnosis and her demise could not have been more than four, maybe six months. It was a childhood leukemia that would become treatable a few years after her death.

Her parents, on their return from the hospital announced that she was gone. Her parents were overcome with grief. They asked me if I wanted my Teddy Bear back. I said no. I wanted her to have it, to play with in heaven.

I think this was the first time I cried out of sadness and grief. Death be not proud!

Chapter 5 – So Much for Original Sin

The Catholic theologian Augustine proffered a view that "*Everyone is born into the world with original sin … and therefore needs to be saved from their sins*."

Frankly I think children should be presumed innocent until they really sin. Anything short of accidentally running the cat's tail over with their tricycle on a mad exuberant spin, or ejecting a perfectly good spoonful of turnip mash at your irritating sister might perhaps pass as a sin. Smoking a cigar … well I will let you decide!

Even then children shouldn't be taken too seriously … after all they are children; and doesn't being Catholic means being ready to forgive.

In the fall of 1966 I was enrolled in a Catholic bilingual jardin d'enfant across town run by old school nuns wearing traditional habits. I would attend the jardin d'enfant only three days a week and the other days I would be at home trying to keep myself busy or out of trouble, or both at the same time. When you are a kid time passes very, very slowly and the world is made up of ten minutes segments at a time, the attention span of a five year old.

From the first moment of my arrival at my jardin d'enfant there was no holding me back. My exuberance probably got the better of me

more often than I can remember, but what would a preschooler in a hurry really worry about.

Beside nuns do not bring children into the world and so what would they really know about children, would they? Its all customary … its all custodial.

As children the nuns were treated a certain way when they grew up in the care of other old school nuns … so they felt entitled. Sound reasonable? Well maybe not to me. It was after all my life.

Bring the children together so they can play with other children and maybe, like a school of fish in the ocean, and perhaps they will all turn and swim in the same direction. Maybe that's what society is really all about. How we swim together. Ever try to find which fish is leading a school of other fish. That's hard if not impossible. Let so with children at a jardin d'enfant

By the third week I knew how a Mustang felt corralled knowing that is was a matter of time before he was to be broken in. Do as you were told! No I would not like to take a nap and yes I did smoke a cigar … don't worry I am not carrying… let me at least 'plain … what you are not 'terested.

You see, you see, I was trying to be like Churchill? You know Winston Churchill … he smoked cigars … de Gaule's friend … no I guess he didn't smoke cigars when he was four, or maybe he did when HIS

father wasn't around. WINSTON CHURCHILL! ... you know about de Gaule but not Churchill (*Figures at a French Catholic jardin d'enfant*). So tell me sister ... what do you think is really wrong with the English?

So I was a bit old for my tender age. But I survived, rescued on more than one occasion by my secret mantra "*Never Give In*".

In retrospect "*Les Soeurs*" weren't even that bad but I wanted to learn how to read. I already knew how to play and I have enough siblings at home. I am here to get on with my growing up, Thank you!

After a few days of stubborn turmoil the nuns and I came to a diplomatic understanding ... what I would later learn is called an *Entente Cordiale*, a cordial understanding, sort of two sides promising to respect each other's wishes.

Well actually it was Mother Superior and I who reached an entente. I was walked to her office and left alone. I sat in a chair and could just barely see over the top of her desk. She had a stern face and looked very old. She stared at me with her amazingly piercing eyes. They seemed to change colours with the change in her demeanour, icy gray one moment and invitingly blue the next.

Maybe it was a parlour trick or may be it was the angle of the light coming in from the large windows and reflecting off her irises. Or maybe it was an acquired skill.

Her office was clean and orderly. The large oak desk she sat behind had a small lamp and did not have a telephone. Who didn't have a telephone in the 1960's?

It was the lack of a telephone that worried me the most. Her habit was something out of the olden days, perhaps the thirties and more noticeable than the other younger nuns. Definitely old school.

In is strange what flashing through the mind of a child. When visiting over with my grand parents a few weeks back I had watched a Saturday night movie called the Colditz Story. As I sat in front of the imposing figure of the lady I remembered a scene in that movie "Only name, rank and serial number, nothing more" …

Mother Superior studied me for a moment before she spoke to me in French. She asked me "Jeune … don't you like it here at our jardin d'enfant?" I hesitated before answering. Only a fool would say no, and even at age five I knew not to be foolish. "Oui".

She already knew my name. "Do you not want to stay here at our jardin d'enfant?" I could see where she was going with her interrogation. "Oui".

"Then you should do as you are told." "Oui Soeur … but don't you want to prepare me for school?"

“What do you think we are doing?”

That left my rank. “I am here to learn and get me ready for school.”

“So what are you saying little one?” Know it was time for my serial number.

“Listen, I don’t want to play. I get to play all the time at home. This is pre-school isn’t it, so teach me.” I straightened up in the chair and smiled the best cherubic smile I could manage.

A few days earlier one of the boys in the jardin d’enfant had angrily struck one of the girls in a moment of terrible spite. It didn’t matter that she was older and bigger than him and that the girl had been picking on him all morning, grabbing toys out of his hand and provoking him.

The boy ‘s punishment was severe and immediate. Three whacks with a cane on his bare backside in front of the entire class.

The little girl who had been punched, and who seemed so innocent, stopped crying and started to take pleasure in his punishment. I sat next to her and watched her watch him. As I glanced between the two subjects in this drama, it didn’t take long for me to understand what she fixated on. I sensed by her fascination that it wasn’t the punishment it was something else. You witch I thought.

I got up and walked away and sat in the corner by myself reading a book. She looked over at me with a smile that soon changed into a smirk. I turned my back and she sensed my disgust with her. Such injustice I thought!

Punishment given, the little boy was led away crying, a trail of earnest tears marking his path. His parents were summoned and the boy was declared *enfant non gratia*. It was all the whisper amongst us children for days afterwards, especially when he didn't come back and it became known that the nuns refused to take him back.

The little girl ended up wearing a shiner, her badge of distinction, for the rest of the week. What she had done went to her head because she started to tease and annoy all the boys in the jardin d'enfant. She left me alone for the rest of the week but a few days into the following week she started to tease and provoke me. I ignored her.

On Wednesday afternoon that week she pushed me over and sat on me for no apparent reason. She was older than me and big boned. I started squirming my way loose. She clamped tightly around me (years later I would respond similarly to such a fix, but that was years later).

When she wouldn't let me free instead of punching or hurting her I turned the tables by tickling her. A punch or pinch would work to her advantage. She didn't expect me to start tickling her and she began to squirm and squeal uncontrollably. Still she wouldn't get off me.

I thought that the tickling would be the end of it but the girl surprised me with a decent right hook. My nose began to bleed. One of the nuns had been watching from afar. She rushed over and pulled her off me. The girl began to scream about being tickled and all. I just stood up and let my blood run all over her new dress. Seemed like the thing to do at the time. She screamed as she was led away for her well deserved punishment.

One of the nuns produced for me a beautifully embroidered handkerchief which was used to stem the flow of blood and she carefully lifted me off the ground and rushed me to the infirmary.

With one hand I clung the handkerchief to my nose and with the other clung tightly to the collar of my angel of mercy. From this little drama I would discover that nuns do not come from another planet, and that they are maternal in all aspects but one.

You are probably wondering about the girl's punishment? Through the wall I could hear her voice and that of a stern adult. She got a talking to and a whack or two in the privacy of the Office of Mother Superior. Things were definitely not equal, but modesty had to prevail, I guess. So much for equality between the sexes.

Sugar and spiced still added up to something different. The 60's still allowed such definitiveness in matters of discipline. Today meanness

in children runs its streak both ways. Perhaps it is this Brave New World we live in?

For the better part of a week or two she behaved herself and then she went back to her cruel ways, picking on boy after boy in the jardin d'enfant. Perhaps she hoped to evoke corporal punishments on more of us fellows but instead we boys all but ignored her, the nuns were vigilant and all she got was a witch's reckoning.

The sisters of mercy finally loss their patience with her. Enough was enough, I guess. One afternoon it was her turn to receive three whacks on her backside for all to watch. This time we were ringside.

My guess is that today she is either a convict with a long rap sheet or a high school principal who cuts a wide swath. Or maybe she is someone who has spent the better part of her adult life taking psychology classes in a futile attempt to better understand her angst (me, never felt the need to study psychology, everything I have learned of the subject I have learned on the fly).

Back to me and my encounter with Mother Superior. She said nothing for a moment then she slowly pushed back from the desk and stood up. I had expected a tall and imposing figure of a person, but instead she was no taller than my mother, 5 foot four if that.

Mother Superior walked to the front of the desk and stood over me. I looked up with pleading eyes. She waited just long enough to inflict a

wave of terror before she asked me to get off the chair. I thought this was it. In my head I began to repeat my secret mantra over and over "*Never Give In*", "*Never Give In*", "*Never Give In*".

I started to perspire, the gig was up I thought. I could feel my backside tingle in anticipation. I held back my tears. All I could think about is not in front of her … She would get too much pleasure.

As I stood next to her desk I put my best stoic expression on my face and held my hand out in front of me expecting punishment. Mother Superior asked me to move my chair close to the side of her desk and asked me to sit. Her smile said No I am not going to punish you. I dodged that bullet.

She said she was hard of hearing and that I spoke too softly for her to hear me from across the room. She didn't mention that I was stuttering, which is something I still do when I am under great stress or duress. Understandably, alone with this unique force of theological astuteness I was fearful.

"Lets have a talk shall we."

No I don't watch too much television. I like going to the library instead.

Soeur, I will sit still if you teach me how to read. Mother Superior was listening. I will take a nap …. if before the nap you teach me how

to read. (I had already realised that in negotiations the return should be upfront). It didn't take long for me to know that she seemed patient enough and I seemed to be able to cross my t's and dot my I's.

Mother Superior softened a bit when she understood that I was just wanting to get on with growing up.

She told me that she grew up in a small town in backwoods Quebec and had gone to school in a one-room school house. That she came from a large poor family and she was the eldest of the nine children – three girls and six boys, (obviously a good French Canadian Catholic family). This could explain why she had a way with stubborn little boys.

She remembered the first book she ever read. After an intense half hour of what seemed like a very reasonable discussion we came to our understanding; I will play nice with the other children … if they taught me how to read. No I am not selfish I just want to learn how to read. Vous Comprendre?. It seems the way I had with Mother Superior was reasonable.

Lucky I did not go every day to preschool or I would have hopped the fence and bolted. It was then they recognized that I had a thing for puzzles and for numbers and one of the nuns began to teach me some mathematics, mostly about adding and subtracting numbers or let me loose with jig saw puzzles and the like. If music didn't tame this troubled beast math and puzzles would.

When all else failed a good picture book would come to my rescue. The main problem though was the books they had at hand at the preschool were all French books and I wanted to also learn how to read English.

I began to smuggle my own library books to the jardin d'enfant. My librarian guardian angle would choose my counter band tomes and with this I would have her stamp of approval. What nun would disagree with a professional librarian?

In the great card game of life one librarian trumps a jardin d'enfant full of nuns any day. If things got really out of hand a good math book or puzzle would be my saving grace. Today you would probably medicate the poor boy, instead of taming the savage beast.

I could hear the sigh of relief when the nuns were told I would be off to summer holidays and then to first grade. The end of spring and the beginning of summer of '67 could not come fast enough for all those concerned.

The tears in the eyes of Mother Superior on my departure were genuine. Perhaps she had figured me either as their greatest failure or their greatest success.

After our little rencontre, having reach acceptable terms of an entente cordiale, I slept, played and watered the plants in synch with all the

other children, but my freedom was in that with time I would learn how to read for myself and at an advanced level.

By I left the jardin d'enfant I could read to nearly a grade three level. In grade four we would take standard aptitude tests. I would be given the reading aptitude test several times because they thought my mark an anomaly … 172.

Oh, and I had started writing with my left hand but that was considered gauche and we had to at all times do the right thing. Maybe in the eyes of "*Les Soeurs*" my predilection for using my left hand was another confirmation of my deviant character.

If they are still around the nuns would all be over a hundred at least. I have however visions that they are busy telling Saint Peter how to run his business. Perhaps there is some truth to what St. Augustine had to say after all, about needing to be saved from our selves.

That having been said, I must say even today I am kind and respectful to Catholic Nuns and have a certain understanding of the uniqueness of their calling.

I know a heart of gold when I see it and any stubbornness on their part should be forgiven, after all stubbornness is an original sin.

Chapter 6 – Never Judge a Book by Its Cover

There was a lot going on in our neighbourhood. Mostly adult stuff. There were many retired people on our block and very few kids.

It was fun to people watch. The lady across the street tended her prize rose. Watching her in her straw hat on her knees almost talking to her flowers, was an activity that helped to take my thoughts off the death of my friend.

Understandably she would never be completely forgotten, but as time has the final say, our earliest remembrances tend to be buried safely away beneath more recent ones. The details of her face would fade from memory so that today I only remember with vague certainty the colour of her hair and eyes. What I remember of "la reste de sa visage" is a composite of borrowed impressions from all the similarly beautiful girls and women I have seen or met over the decades. When I see a woman of the right age with similar traits I sometimes imagine … if only she had lived, this could her!

I do recall everything about the teddy bear. Teddy bears are so much easier to remember than people.

Over the spring and summer of my fifth year we built a new home and moved into it. I could tell that my mother was happier than my father

that we would be moving out of the small duplex we were renting into a much larger place of our own.

She needed more space for her growing and rambunctious family. He had to work long hours to provide for his growing and rambunctious family. Neither had much energy left at the end of the day, but I sensed they were happy nonetheless … even if we were RAMBUNCTIOUS! Boys could be boys. Today I guess this would be deemed a disorder to be treated with medication. Then it was just expected.

Better medicate the adults, don't you think? My mother had her Pernod, a taste I too have acquired (and for absinthe on occasion). My father had his beer and cigars.

The landlords would also be happy to see us go. They both lived a few doors up from us. They were a middle aged German couple. The man seemed a happy go lucky type. She, on the other hand, was dour and demanding.

The German landlady got particularly angry when as two and three year olds we took to using the walls in our bedroom to produce grand works of art with our colourful Crayola crayons. Boys will be boys. We covered the walls as high as we could stand on our "tippy toes." As a young artist I was fond of circles I am told.

Even after three coats of paint the wax residue of the crayons could still be seen. I bet if the house is still standing that remnants are still to be seen.

The Landlord knew my father was in the RCAF and had spent time in France and Germany in the 1950's and so they talked about planes from time to time. To begin with, before I had a chance to talk with him, I already knew he had spent a short amount of time in France in 1940, then time in Britain and then in Canada.

Since I was very young I have enjoyed making and flying paper airplanes. One day while I was playing on the front lawn with my creations, the German landlord happened along. He stopped and watched me eagerly fly my planes for a few meagrely feet.

I saw him watching me and since I was gregarious and naturally curious I launched one of my designs carefully in his direction and almost by a miracle it landed at his feet. He stooped over and picked it up. I ran over and stood patiently in front of him while he studied my design and construction methods.

He said I have promise!

Here was a word I had never heard used before in this manner and so I asked him what he meant, respectfully mind you. In the era I grew up in it was expected that we would respect our elders.

He smiled and said that the designs I was making were good for speed but not for distance. I took the hint and ran back to the steps of the duplex were I sat and folded my paper airplanes and grab a new sheet of paper, ran back and gave the page to him.

Without asking he began to fold a design I had never seen before. He carefully trimmed away some of the paper using either the pocket knife he carried with him or with the sharp edge of his finger nail, something I had never seen done before. I studied his technique closely. I learnt a few lessons that day.

Today I dispense with scissors whenever possible cutting things by hand or with a Swiss army knife that I carry each and every day in the same pocket has my wallet. A gentleman can live without his wallet, but not without his pocket knife.

I watched him closely. As he folded his design he quietly recounted to me that he had been a Luftwaffe pilot during the war and had been shot down over London during the Battle for Britain. I asked what he flew, and he said a Me-109.

I asked him if he had flown with Adolf Gallant! This gave him a start. He looked at me and then a big smile broke across his face. His "Mein Gott" survived the translation. He put his hand on my shoulder. "Ja. He was one of our commanding officers. How do you know of him my young friend?"

I smiled but did not say that a few nights back I happen to have watched a program about the Battle for Britain, and that Adolf Gallant was interviewed on the show.

To show how clever I was I quipped “you had to be gallant to fly fighter planes”. The double entendre brought a roar of laughter out of him. “I don’t think Adolf was all that impressed with my flying.” I asked him if he had any kills. He stopped speaking, solemnly shaking his head. He just continued to finish folding his novel plane design.

He carefully finished his design, studied its symmetry and balance, checked the wind and when he thought ready, sent it gliding into the wind and across the street and into the neighbours prized rose bush. It must have flown a good 12 metres.

I jumped up and down with joy. I had never seen such a flight by a paper airplane before.

He had talents I could not have imagined watching him do his walk abouts. I guess the adage that one should not judge a book by its covers applies here. I would never have thought that a product of such beauty could possible come from the hands of this man, for his hands were large and rough. His fingers were short and his nails were hardened and yellowed with age.

He took in my excitement but stayed silent. It took all my boyish charms to get him to speak again. "Where did you learn to fold such a good paper airplane", I asked enthusiastically.

"Before we became pilots we learned how to fly gliders and before we learned how to fly gliders they had us learn all about the flight of birds. Our glider instructors taught us how to fold paper airplanes. On Sunday mornings after church we had contests to see which of our designs would glide the best."

I was game. "Did you win with your designs?"

"Ja, from time to time I did ..." He paused and looked back across the road.

I thought he meant me to go fetch his paper airplane. I was about to run after his glider to recover it, when he put a hand on my shoulder and stopped me in my place,

He stared triumphantly across the street. He stood there with his hands on his hips rocking on the balls of his feet. "Leave it, I will get it for you. She will be angry someone has harmed her prized roses. Better me to get her angry then you." The way he said it I could not tell whether he was pleased or displeased.

The lady across the street was also German and lived alone. As I have already mentioned, she lived for her roses. Indeed they were very

special. I knew that for a fact because even I had risked her wrath and have sneaked a peek and a whiff. They were indescribable.

I did not know much about roses when I was a young boy, but I did know a good thing when I say it.

A few years later I would read in the Edmonton Journal that they were hybrid roses of her own creation. Her legacy will be their inclusion in one of the public parks in the city during Canadian Centennial year 1967.

I looked up at him. He had an enigmatic smirk on his face, have smile half frown. I had seen him doing work on her lawn and flower garden. They seemed, in my boyish estimation, to get along better than he did with his wife.

There was a sparkle in his eyes that had not been there a moment before. Was it the fun he was having or the lady across the street that caused this? Now there's something for a little boy to imagine about.

He turned back to glance at his place, and I guess thinking the coast was clear, briskly marched across the street, up the lady's walkway to the base of the stairs, carefully untangled the paper airplane from one of the rose bushes and then did an about face and marched briskly back to where we had stood. It was all so precise!

He handed me the plane and continued his narrative. “But you know … I was a much better glider pilot than a fighter pilot. I ran out of petrol over London during a mission. The Royal Air Force knew that if they couldn’t shoot us down they should try to drive us as far West as possible so that we would run out of petrol and could not make it home to France. I was one of the younger and more inexperienced pilots in my squadron. I was a vingman and therefore was expendable.”

This unique word, I had never heard before, perplexed me. He looked at me and understood. “Do you know what a vingman is?” He pronounced the w as a v …“vingman.”

I shook my head. “Ach so … a vingman flys besides and behind his leader and protects him. The leader’s job is to look ahead for something to shoot at. The vingman is job is to protect him. The vingman is what the enemy shoots at first, before they try to shoot down the leader. The vingman is not as experienced or valuable as the leader and so the vingman is expendable.”

Years later I would read somewhere that the German Luftwaffe were the first air force to develop this technique. The whole thing worked well and is still in use by air forces throughout the world.

I remembered seeing pictures of two Me-109’s flying together on the television program and so nodded that I understood.

“That day over London we were being attacked by Spitfires. My leader was running low on petrol and so he ordered me to break off and draw away the RAF so he could escape. He ordered me to be his sacrificial offering to the gods of war.”

With his hands he began to re-enact the whole episode. His hand movements brought added excitement to his story. “ I broke from my leader, dove and headed west as fast as I could. Four Spitfires followed me down. They shot at me, again and again, but missed.”

He paused for a breath. “I flew because my life depended on it. It took me too long to elude them. When they broke off to return to their aerodrome I knew that I would not make it home to France and so I flew back over the heart of London, ran out of petrol and bailed out. My plane crashed in the Thames River and I came down near Trafalgar Square and nearly ended up hanging from Nelson’s spire. The British captured me gave me a pint of ale in one of their London pubs and then marched me away. “

He took the paper airplane from my hands and checked the glider was fine and returned it to me, and finished his story. “I spent the rest of the war in a prisoner of war camp first in Britain, and then here Canada beginning in 1941. Canada treated me so well that after the war I emigrated here with my wife.”

He looked at his watch. I stared at his watch and realized it was an expensive pilot's watch. It looked ancient and had a cracked face. "I must go or I will be late for church."

It was a Sunday afternoon and I guess he was off to the Catholic church up the road. From time to time I saw him at the same church we attended, sitting by himself near the back. His wife never came with him.

He would arrive just before the service and would leave quickly as it ended. As he walked away I realized that he was walking the whole distance, which was quite a journey. To be there on time he was leaving nearly two hours before the 5:00 pm. Service. They had an old black Mercedes but I guess he thought he needed the exercise. Maybe he also needed the time to think about life?

I remembered that day that he wore a very forties, fashionable grey fedora with a green feather in it headband. The hat sort of made him look like an elderly version of Humphrey Bogart.

After he had left I carefully unfolded his original and tried my hand at folding my own copies. By the third copy I had mastered the design. I had flown it for about an hour that afternoon before I was told it was time to get ready for church and had to go inside.

When no one was looking I carefully tucked the paper airplane in the pocket of my jacket and waited by the door, secure in the thought I

would bring my prize paper airplane with me to the church service. I know what you are thinking. No … I wouldn't do that. Would you?

During the church service that day I turned to see him sitting several rows nearer the front. I think is was because he arrived late and his usual seat in the back was already occupied.

I waved at him and smiled. I was about to point him out to my father when the landlord put his finger to his lips and shushed me. Then he pointed to the front. I turned back around.

For the rest of the service I did not dare turn around. When it was over and I turned to say hello to him but he was already gone.

When we walked back to our station wagon I carefully drew out the my glider design, unfolded it and launched it on its way.

A gust of wind caught it and it fly high overhead, the hand of God perhaps. The last I saw of it was when it slowly glided to a majestic landing on the roof of the Church. If only the landlord had been watching. My whole family, aghast, watched my glider land on the roof of the church.

Proudly I stood but they offered not a word, neither of praise nor of rebuke. They were not impressed. We were in a hurry to get home for Sunday dinner. All my mother could say is "stop your foolishness. We have to go. I have a roast in the oven."

While growing up I would hear the same sort of rebuke over and over again during my daily antics, but on Sundays I tried very hard to behave, really I did. There was something about Sundays that made them so different from other day of the week.

Just as I turned to follow my family to our car something caught my eye. I think it may have been the green feather in his fedora. Off in the distance stood the landlord watching. He smiled and waved, then walked off. He had watched after all.

To this day the perfection of the glider design he taught me remains one of the truly remarkable achievements of my early years.

The next time I saw him, which was several weeks later, I asked him the burning question … why he went to church by himself. He said because his wife was Lutheran and she couldn't tolerate Catholics. This lead to a foolish question. "Why did she marry you?" He looked back at his house before he answered me carefully.

"My wife, she just wanted to escape from Germany. As a young girl she had survived the bombing of Hamburg and had lost her family. We met when I returned to Germany after the war. We got married and came to Canada because it was the convenient thing to do."

Almost as the words left his lips I sensed he regretted confiding in me this deep and dark secret. By then I knew he was happier when

visiting the German Lady across the street. I am glad I wasn't around to watch that little drama unfold.

My view of the Germany landlady would change. From that day, to the day we moved into our new home, I tried hard not to anger her and tried equally hard to understand her.

Just like the little boy in the picture of the Blitz of London who had lost his parents, she would be the girl in pony tails with blue ribbons in a picture of the aftermath of the fire bombing of Hamburg, alone and without a family if such a picture existed and had survived the fire bombing itself.

Years later I would be reminded of the landlady in a painting by Cranach the Elder hanging in the National Gallery in Ottawa. I don't know why. It might have been the shape of the face and nose. Perhaps she had once been a stunning trophy wife with a beauty which time had stolen from her. For some beauty was fleeting, for others they age from the heart outward, dead long before they were buried in the cold earth.

Anyone who has seen the 16th century painting I am talking about knows that Cranach the Elder made the head of the figure too small compared to her body, and perhaps this is what ultimately triggered the remembrance.

After we moved I would not speak to either of them again. I seemed to vaguely remember hearing mention that she would return to Hamburg and he would move in with the Frau across the street and grow old tending her prize roses. Whatever makes a person happy I guess.

Chapter 7 – The Great Trek

The house that was built for us was quite a prize compared to a small duplex. We couldn't afford the land and so our grandparents lent their son, my father the money. He would pay for the house itself. The property cost a whopping $ 6,000 dollars in 1965 dollars. The house perhaps half that.

Today the land would be worth maybe $ 500,000 and the house (which is still standing) perhaps $ 50,000.

For a small boy watching the whole construction was intriguing. Being a curious boy I wanted to see everything. I wanted to touch everything. And of course I had many questions. I even took to trying to read and interpret the blue prints. My father the mechanical engineer took particular note of my interest in the blueprints.

The first time I saw where our house would be built was when my mother bundled my younger sister and I to walk four blocks from our duplex to a completely foreign territory of large almost palatial homes on Rowland Road. It was early spring and the sun was bright up in the sky but it seemed despite the effort to get there, the place was cold and uninviting.

After we had trudged along on the still snow covered sidewalks, icy at spots and cleared to the concrete at others, unannounced we stopped.

My mother turned us both to face west and then she proudly pointed at an empty lot sandwiched between two homes. The lot was covered in ice encrusted snow about a metre deep. A large non descript square that defied my sense of imagination.

I turned my attention to the house to the north of us and saw a woman's face staring out from the front window. She did not smile. Great, I thought another one! I turned to look at the house to the south just as the postman was delivering the mail there. As he returned to the sidewalk and proceeded in our direction I was suddenly intrigued by him instead of my surroundings. He had two bags, one slung over each shoulder and his face was a ruddy red as if he had been running.

The sidewalk that we were standing on had not been shovelled understandably since there was no house on the lot. He did not slow as he stepped from the cleared safe sidewalk to the icy and treacherous portion we were standing on. I held my breadth for some sixth sense told me that something was about to happen. The postman chugged on sorting the mail as he walked.

When he was about onto us he suddenly looked up in our direction and came to a equally sudden stop. Sure enough inertia being what it is, while he stopped his two bags continued on and almost in slow motion the postman was carried off his feet by the mass of the yet undelivered mail.

Being a gallant sort he fought to avoid colliding into us and ended up making a fine imprint of himself in the snow on the empty lot. Some of his mail was scattered here and there. My little sister started to laugh. Even as she grew up she would never change, finding intrigue and interest in the misfortune of others.

It was then that I heard some new words for the first time. "What the hell are you doing standing in the middle of no where lady." I looked up at my mother's face and saw that she was very angry. I did not want to bear witness to what was about to happen. So I looked up past the carnage into the window of the neighbouring house and I saw the lady of the house laughing heartily.

The postman stopped swearing and began to lift himself off the snow. He saw me looking up and away and so he looked there too and saw the same thing I did. When the lady in the house saw that the postman was staring at her she abruptly stopped laughing at his misfortune. She remained and stood watch over the evolving drama.

Without being asked I started to help pick up the mail. "Sorry Mister Postman." I said. I guess from a young age I was already a gentleman. Even as an adult I have never been one to thrive on confrontation. "Don't blame us … blame 'nertia".

The postman stopped what he was doing and looked up at me "Nertia … sounds like some Greek goddess" he smirked. "When an object is moving it wants to continue moving."

The postman suddenly roared with a deep thunderous laughter. “You mean Inertia!” He articulated the word slowly. I guess he wanted that I correct me pronunciation. I handed him the letters I had collected and he nodded. He ruffled my hair with his free hand. “Smart kid. One day he’ll grow up to be a rocket scientist.”

My mother had not said a word when this was going on. Perhaps she was speechless by the foul language she had just heard. The postman brushed himself off and continued on.

Just in front of the next house he stopped, surveyed the mail at hand looked up at the lady waiting for her mail. He slowly and dramatically took the several pieces of mail that was hers and decided they could wait for another day and then walked on.

In the better part of three seconds the lady was standing at her porch yelling at the postman. “Where are you going with my mail?” The postman stopped and slowly turned. “You mail! The mail belongs to the care of the Post Office until it is delivered … if it gets delivered at all.”

Smart fellow the postman! I enthusiastically waved at him and he waved back and continued on. With time we became good friends. The neighbour lady never! She had seen me wave at the postman and had stormed back into her house.

With time the postman would regal me with little vignettes of his life's experiences. He had served in the Royal Canadian Army in the Italian campaigns in World War two. From him I heard about strange mechanical beasts, Panthers and Tigers and all. He had the unenviable task of taking these mechanical beasts on with his PIAT launcher.

The burns on his right hand spoke to his tribulations, once having to engage a gaggle of five in the space of ten minutes. Such a burn was a small price to pay for his life.

The postman was typical of Canadian Veterans of the age, never fully adjusting to civilian life but kept busy and appreciated by a Crown and Parliament who believed in them and their dutiful service.

After our visit to the empty lot, we trudged back home to await the warmer spring weather, the thawing and the breaking of the ground that would usher in the beginning of the construction of our new home.

When the day finally came to begin construction we were all in attendance as the heavy machinery began to dig the foundation. I was intrigued as most boys are with the machinery that arrived to clear and prepare the lot. The monsters turned, growled and chewed their way into the still hard permafrost soil.

During a break in the work I stole onto one of the parked monsters and tried to figure how the beast worked. Suddenly from behind I was dragged from my seat by a strong arm and held at shoulder level by the operator. He stared directly in the eyes. I matched his stare back (an acquired skill I had developed as of late). "What are you doing half-pint?" The man obviously could not stand children.

He carried me by the scruff of my coat and deposited me at the feet of my mother like a sack of potatoes. I don't know if she was angrier at him or me, but to the caterpillar operator her dislike didn't matter. For me, that was another thing. I thought, oh boy, strike off another hairbrush to the gods of punishment.

"Keep you kids away from my equipment. The last things I want is some kid getting hurt." When he got back to his rig and tried to start it, he could not find the keys. When he was carrying me I had let the keys slip out of my hand onto the ground about half way between his tractor and where I now stood.

Time to have a little fun with him. Besides leaving keys in heavy equipment with kids about, now that was tempting fate. "Hey mister." "What" he bellowed back" "What's the matter?" "What have you done with the the #*&$ing keys." I had heard another adult word again. I smirked.

“I don’t have your keys … mister.” A truthful answer I may say because really I didn’t have his keys. Now if he had asked where the keys were that would have been a different matter.

She asked “did you take his keys?” By the time you are five any boy worth his weight in bubble gum has perfected the subtle art of dissuasion. “Who me … what would I want his silly keys for.” Never give in, I thought, Never give in.

By now the operator was off his caterpillar and walking over to where we stood. His big burly muscles protruding folds in his white t-shirt. To add to the drama my mother asked me to turn out my pockets.

A few pennies and rocks, a small pocket knife which was confiscated on the spot (a gift from the old German Landlord), some bubble gum (for emergencies), a few other odds and ends but sure enough no keys.

“Like I said mister I don’t have your dumb keys!” When kids are annoyed, words like silly and dumb find their way into their conversation. Later for some as they grow up it would be the adult word #*&$, or if it can be imagines, some things worst. Deletable expletives were never really part of my adult vocabulary. I would prefer more sophisticated linguistic.

“Maybe you dropped them?” “Nope … I left them in the machine. I always do.” “Well they are not there are they!” By now my mother was giving him the evil eye.

He was about to use another choice mouthful before he caught himself and turned away. As he stormed back to his rig I swore he walked right on top of the keys, pushing them further into the ground. I smiled. Now they would be found.

In fact they were found the following day. It had rained overnight. A rare occurrence and the following morning the keys sparkled in the bright morning sunlight, just as the operator drove up with the spare keys. Without the keys he couldn’t finish the work yesterday and he couldn’t drive the caterpillar onto the towing trailer at the end of the day.

I watched him as he dug the keys out of the mud. “You find your dumb keys mister?” He walked over to me, tossing and catching the keys as he walked. “Yup … sorry pint size. Guess it was my fault. How can I make it up to you? Here let me show you my caterpillar.”

He walked me over to his yellow monster. He took the time to tell me about how it work and even answered most of my questions. For the rest of my life, when even I see a large diesel the first question that will come to mind is “Is it a Cummings? And what is the piston size and stroke?” You have to be a boy to appreciate diesels.

It took about four months for the house to be built. When the day came to move in the last things that was done was a lawn was seeded back and front. We were told to stay off the lawn. Our grandparents came to visit the day we moved in the house.

The following morning to our great amusement my mother and grandmother were in a heated argument. It seemed that my grandmother had got it in her head that a vegetable patch was the thing for the front of the house. She had gotten up very early and had begun to plant before my mother came rushing out of her new home in her house coat.

We followed my mother out of our new house and there was my grandmother on her knees digging seed potatoes into our newly seeded lawn. After a few choice words my grandmother backed down, the seed potatoes were retrieved but that corner of the front lawn would never be the same.

I guess I take after my grandmother because I have always preferred a vegetable garden over lawns and flowers any day. To save the situation we planted a Canadian Maple tree in that corner of the lawn. As I grew I watched it grow. Even climbed it a few times. Recently I visited our old house using Google earth and there she was, the Maple tree majestic over the front lawn. It had grown tall and proud.

The location of our new house nearly doubling the walking distance to the school. The busy east west thoroughfare two blocks south of our

home was the great divide between home and school and since I was not allowed to cross the great divide I had taken to going down an embankment, under an over pass and then back up the other side avoiding having to cross the busy street altogether. It added a good ten minutes to the toddle but it was safer and I could cross out of the purview of the crossing guard. I could then approach the school along one of three lanes arriving at the other side of the playing field which when the fields were full of playing children on recess made the whole task easy, but would make anonymity all but in possible when recess was over.

Lesson learned I took to planning my school excursions to the minute, carefully dead reckoning time and distance travelled and arriving just before but never later than at the peak of recess, a window of perhaps fifteen minutes.

If all went according to plan, I would then follow the students into the school through the back door and then make a break for the school library. A quick surreptitious glance around the corner to see whether to coast was clear and the bookworm could crawl and settle in. For as long as possible I would then hide in the stacks, enjoying the multitude of books.

During my pre-school excursions it took several weeks for the school librarian to wise up to who I was and what I was up to. She was a creature of bad habits and I knew the coast was clear when she went out of the library and up the hall for a cigarette in the staff room.

You could set a clock by her addiction. The not so subtle clue of the smoker's cough, something an uncle had, gave me the idea to hop the queue when she stepped away for a quick puff. In the end though, she sort of figured things out and the gig was up.

My mother also started to keep a closer tab on me. She was getting tired of having to chase after me … she was expecting another child and well you know … slowing down a bit.

Chapter 8 – A Little Matisse

The summer of ’67 was my interlude between attending the play of the jardin d’enfant and the serious work at elementary school. The summer of ’67 was also about, Centennial Year and Expo 67 – “Man and His World”, in Montréal.

I had reached an age when I could say I had begun to take notice of adult things, not merely because what adults do are different (some adult behaviour still remains childish) but that they had some underlying reason. I felt the transition from things familiar to things not.

It is good when parents can protect children from the wickedness of the world (the 1960’s was about many things, Vietnam, free love, riots, drugs, assassinations). At around six we would close the television and have our dinner (conveniently timed to miss the news). If the newspaper had something good on its front page then it was left out for us children to enjoy. Otherwise into the dustbin it would go (where much of the history of the day would itself end up).

I was a good little man in a big bad world. When I began to understand what was going on in the world I started to suffer from insomnia and have the occasional horrendous nightmare. I guess I was the age at which most children become aware of their mortality.

It was followed by my understanding that if we do no live forever, if we had an end it meant we also had a beginning.

As it happened, 1967 was the year my little sister made her grand arrival into the world, and I had a front row seat to the grand evolution, short of, of course the whole hospital delivery thing.

One day my mother is there "Expecting" and then the next day she is gone and an aunt is there looking after us. Then a few days later the little bundle of joy arrives home. From her first day in our world, she provided us much hope, hense her name Nadine which derives from the word hope. I guess her "delivery" helped put things back into balanced. Two boys, two girls …

The late 1960's had other surprises. Miniskirts were in (hard not to notice them when you are pint size and walking down main street). Hair was getting shorter on the women and longer on some of the men. Mostly their short hair was still covered by a dapper hat on a majority of men. Grey suits, black ties, pocket protectors, the whole ten yards. With women's fashion, colour was getting more industrial and raw, and less earthy. Women wanted to be noticed. Tie-dye was fashionable (macramé would arrive in a few short years).

Despite the bad news, on the outside everyone seemed happy. In many ways, the summer of '67 was a surrealist blur for me. At a tender age I had been introduced to surrealism by some art books my mother had around the house, including one about Picasso and

another about Dali. What an introduction to art for an impressionable young man!

I was fortunate that I had pretty good hand eye coordination and good motor skills for a boy. Having perfected the folding of paper airplanes, I had the fold and cut thing down to an art. The arts and crafts things went well.

In June '67 my mother decided to cultivate an artistic interest in me and my brother by sending us off for a week every day to the art gallery and art day camp for children. Maybe we were being preened for a show and tell before our maternal grand parents.

It wasn't play school, it was a real school, teaching real artistic ideas, an academy of sorts. We had easels, sketching pencils (the blue Staedtlers drawing pencils, none of those big thick red children pencils), charcoal and pastels.

At the beginning of each session, and there were two each day, ten for the week, a real artist would talk about real art to a captive audience of students. I was the youngest in the class, the oldest being a girl of thirteen. There were only a dozen of us. Each day after our instruction, we would be given an assignment or project, pretty much as they normally teach art. I was introduced to still life this way. A table, a bowl full of fruit, a glass vase, light, shadow and perspective. Drawing came naturally to me. Painting less so.

The art of "*Perspectiva*" was taught us by a small and animate Italian artist who could not but capture our imagination about what lines and aesthetics lies hidden away inside a drawings. He showed us some examples starting with Masaccio's beautiful painting, the Trinity of Christ on the cross. We had a reproduction of a Dali painting Christ on the Cross in our Living Room, with a far different perspective (it would take me some time before I could say I understood Dali's reason for the perspective he chose).

This was also the day that I was introduced to the miracle of the Renaissance for the first time and the lives of the artists that would later become very familiar.

The vanishing point of a work of art has fascinated me ever since. I cannot look at a painting, or a drawing without perceiving its "*Perspectiva*". Some years later at an interview for a teaching position at an art college in Vancouver I would be asked to explain Bruneleschi perspective experiment, and with batting an eye I recounted almost word for word the explanation first given me that summer of '67.

That day I perfected the drawing of straight lines, which for a half-pint is rather hard. Well to be honest, I had a big help. The twelve or thirteen year old girl had her easel next to mine and she was amused by my hesitant nature before a blank paper or canvas. Hesitation is a common hindrance with the novice. After a few false starts on my part, she set her pencil down, took three steps sideways and while

standing behind me reached for my drawing hand and took it firmly in hand.

I knew to trust her (she was after all quite good at drawing) and she just guided my hand, HB pencil in tow, across the page. I watched with some detachment as the line appeared on the paper. I also noticed her long slim fingers and beautiful long nails. They had clear nail polish on them, which I had never seen before.

As her face was very nearly touching mine I notice her deep brown eyes and dark curly eyelashes. She smelled of roses or lavender or something like that. Then we did the same thing from the top to the bottom of the easel size foolscap paper. She stepped back. “There that wasn’t too hard was it.”

Her intercession happen so quickly, and with such flair, that I was momentarily speechless. I may even have been blushing. I was half her age and less than half her size.

“Now you try.” She handed me my pencil back. I was so nervous I fumbled and dropped my pencil, which rolled to her feet. Flustered I quickly lunged for it, lost my balance and fell forward, hitting my head on one of her knees. There I was now in a tangle at her feet. It seems I had tripped over the hem of my smock. What a klutz I thought.

My eyes were tearing up. I rubbed the bump on my head and I fought back the urge to cry. She started to laugh as she helped me up. “Are you ok?” She seemed genuinely concerned, and rubbed her hand over the bump. “That must hurt.” I nodded. “I guess you are not use to wearing a dress”, she joked. I looked down at the smock. It went down almost to my feet. She was right, it did look like a dress, and a poorly fitted one.

All during this little mishap my brother just ignored what was going on and motored along on his drawing. It would never cease to amaze me how often he would just take no notice of his siblings.

Defiantly I said to her “its a smock not a dress. Boys don’t wear dresses. Girls do!” I untangled myself from it and took the silly thing off.

She just looked at me with a sympathetic smile. “I don’t like wearing smocks when I work either.” She was wearing jeans and a brightly coloured blouse. “Dresses maybe, but not every day.”

At this point I dried my eyes and figured a change in tack was in order. I appreciate the help she gave me with the lines and all and thought it best to stay on friendly terms with her so that she could help me master some of the other techniques we were expected to learn. I extended my hand “I am Patrick.”

She extended her hand and introduced herself. She pointed at the art instructor. "He's my father." I looked up at her drawing. She had dispensed with the lines exercise and had begun a fair representation of the still life on the table in front of us. "That explains why you are so good at art."

My honest response delighted her. "You think I am good?"

I mistook the context of her words and blurted out "I think you are pretty." Then I realized she was in fact asking about her artwork, not herself. Oh well, nothing wrong with being nice. I would learn to try to be as nice to people as possible. If you tease someone you don't like you just can't run fast enough.

I was now so embarrassed I wanted to shrink and hide behind my easel. It didn't bother me that I might look foolish in front of her father. Adults always find children foolish, unless they themselves are children at heart. I knew he would understand, but to look foolish in front of her, well that was different.

My face must have been a bright crimson by this point. "You're sweet. How old are you?" "Six." Next to her I felt small and insignificant. Hoping it would take the edge off my feeling I continued, "I start school in September. How old are you?"

“I am going into grade seven … it’s not right to ask a girl her age.” Mentally I did the math, six plus seven is thirteen. “I bet you’re thirteen!”

She winked at me. She actually did! “You’re quick for you age.” I blushed again. “Will … will you teach me some … some more about lines and stuff?” I stutter when I am nervous. She nodded and the stepped forward and we drew more lines together. I was enjoying her presence at many levels. By the end of that session I understood the rudiments of measuring and judging proportions.

She went on to help me to appreciate the vanishing point, horizons lines, the aesthetics of ascending and descending lines and most importantly, action lines.

No we didn’t draw figures that summer, but anyone who has can appreciate the importance of action lines. Instead the following day she brought some of her European comics and showed me the action lines in some of the drawings. This was the first time I saw Tin Tin or Asterix and Obelix.

The following day and for the rest of the week she came attired in nice and colourful summer dresses, with the tresses of her chestnut brown hair freed from the elastic that she had been wearing. She was, literally, someone to look up to. Time passed too quickly after that.

Every session she helped me to better understand and apply the artistic techniques being taught us. She helped me understand some of the many things you can do with a simple HB pencil: the texture of lines, their weight, how the shape of the lead determines the character of the line. I still prefer a good HB pencil, over any other. In the end I learned more art from her than from the instructors of the remaining art sessions.

The last day was about portraits and so I let Francis draw my portrait. She was wearing a bright yellow dress. The sun was streaming in from a window overhead, flooding the room with natural lighting. She and her dress merged into one in the bright light. The more and more she drew, the more wonderful I felt. Perhaps this was love and affection.

That day she drew a portrait and underneath on a smaller piece of paper she drew a cherub, floating above an angel. The angel was made in her likeness, the cherub in mine. My bow and arrow was pointed at her and she was peering up at me.

As she sat there and worked away something rather remarkable happened to me. My body flooded with an indescribable sensation (endorphins perhaps). This feeling would be imprinted in me in a sort of Pavlovian way. This indescribable sensation would happen over and over again as I would sit for portraits and drawings for my artist friends in years to come.

There was just one thing left. A surprise actually. At the end of the class I found myself in front of a reporter and cameraman, being asked my opinion of art and the art school. I put on my best serious face and answer the questions carefully. I ended up in a feature picture and article in the Saturday edition of the Edmonton Journal newspaper. I don't know why I was chosen.

Maybe it was my tender age, or maybe it was the artistic lines that Francis helped me to draw. In my smock and beret, outlined by a real life easel I was told I looked like a miniature Henri Matisse.

Sadly the art class was now over and we were sent on our way with our portfolios tucked safely under our arms. It was somewhat amazing how much we had done in the five days. I am saddened that those precious pieces of work would, with time, go missing. Today I would give a months salary for a chance to once again see these masterpieces.

Chapter 9 – Montréal, the Trip of a Lifetime

Well I didn't have much time to bask in my laurels. We hit the ground running to prepare for our trip to Montreal. We would be traveling, my mother, sister, brother and I by Air Canada jet. I recall that my father would catch up with us when he could later that week.

I was enthralled beyond words by the whole adventure. Never before travelled by air. I had also never before visited my maternal grandparents. They had come to visit us last year, just after we moved into our new home. Never been to Eastern Canada. Never been to Montreal. Never met the relatives. I still hadn't wrapped my mind around the fact that my mother hand brothers and sisters!

And we would be going to a big party, Expo '67.

We arrived at the Edmonton International Airport several hours before we were scheduled to leave. Long before it had become necessary to arrive early and be patient, the early arrival is a habit that my parents never would give up. Traveling was a leisurely undertaking for them and they would do a great deal of traveling by air, train and ship.

I had been to the Edmonton International airport, but only to welcome my French Canadian grandparents. This time we were the travellers. Compared to today, traveling by air was so pleasant then.

This was before the Black September Movement and the PLO took to highjacking aircraft, and long before September 11th and Al Quaeda. Besides there was only about 12.5 million Canadians then and not the 33.5 million we have today. The morning of our trip to Montreal you could have sent a bowling ball on its way and not hit a person.

The airport main building was high and cavernous. I noticed the echo from the occasional loud noise. While we waited in line I took from time to time to dropping a book I was carrying letting out a loud clap and listening for an echo.

After a few drops my mother got annoyed and took my book away. Fine, I will do something else. I took to people watching. Something I still enjoy when I got to airports.

The pilots have not changed much in their attire over the past five decades, but the stewardesses (yes, I know we now call then flight attendants) they would far more wonderfully dressed then, compared to now. Now they are prim, then they were proper.

The stewardess wore brightly coloured frocks and dresses, patterned after the diva of the '60's, Jackie Kennedy. Everywhere I looked there was a facsimile of Jackie Kennedy right down to the handbag. Everything about traveling by air was more fashionable then, compared to today.

My mother also got into the spirit of the age. She had a Jackie Kennedy hat on, under which she hide a roast which she hopped to smuggle to her parents for the big welcoming dinner. Around the equator she was evidently expecting another child.

My sister had an earache which made the whole trip more unbearable for her and of course the rest of us as well. My brother, the know it all, as older brother often are, was being a real brat. And me, I was amused and spellbound by everything I was seeing.

Time passed rather quickly once our bags were checked in and we were settled into the waiting lounge. I had my nose pressed to the giant plate glass window and studied the parked and moving planes intently. About half of then were old prop jobs and some were fancy jets. I recognized almost all the jets but the smaller propeller airplanes, well I could pick out a DC-3 quite easily but the more modern planes I had no clue (most, in turns out, were Lockheed Electras and DC-6's).

Then it arrived, pulled by an awefully small tractor … an awefully big plane. It was mine and it was the finest aircraft you could imagine. Sleak, like a bloodhound, with two flaring nostrils, air intakes in the front underside.

Our DC-8 was rolled into place and men began to clamber over it. After perhaps ten minutes a fuelling truck arrived and began to fill

her full of jet fuel. The food provisioning truck drove up and lifted its load up to the door.

Then I turned to watch two pilots arrive at the gate carrying their satchel cases, no doubt full of secret dispatches I imagined. The pilot saw me standing at the window and so he set down his case, walked over and said hello. "You must be travelling with us today."

I nodded. "You are taking us to Montreal. We are going to Expo '67."

"Aren't you a lucky boy." He pointed to the airplane and asked "Do you know what kind of plane that is?" I nodded "It's a DC-8. It's a jet plane," I said quite proudly. I pointed to the four stripes on the sleeve of his coat. "And you are the pilot".

"I have to go and get the plane ready. Maybe while we are in the air we will have time and you can visit us in the flight deck."

I must have shown some confusion for he continued … "You can visit us at the front of the plane. Would you like that? " I understood that and nodded, head and shoulders together for emphasis.

"You must promise you will be a good boy during the trip."

I nodded again, this time with less emphasis. "Its not me you should worry about, it's her." I pointed to my younger sister. "She has an ear ache, and she cries a lot."

The pilot smiled a knowing smile and returned to his case, picked it up and was about to disappear to the walkway when he motioned to a stewardess and pointed over to me. Then he was gone.

The stewardess walked over to me. She was tall, slim and had wonderfully kind eyes. She squatted down beside me and said "the pilot tells me that if you are a good boy you can come to visit the flight deck when we are in the air."

I stood tall and exaggerated a bit, "I am always a good boy" and smiled. I think she probably thought, a good boy is like a jumbo shrimp. An oxymoron … Well, I imagine, this being the 1960's and the baby booming being what it was at the time that she had probably seen her fill of bad little boys and girls. I was determined to make the visit to the front of the air plane and so I was on my best behaviour.

The infirmed and families, then as now, were always the first aboard. I did not mind not getting the window seat for being a consummate people watcher, I knew the isle was the place to be.

No matter, a promise had been made to me that on the return flight I would get the window seat. Second choice, once again. Those of you who are second born can understand that sentiment.

Today I wanted to be close to the isle so that when it was time to visit the front of the plane then I was ready. This invitation was a secret

that I thought best to keep from my siblings. I too can play at the game of life. They didn't know, and I wasn't to be the one to tell them, that I had been invited to the flight deck.

You know, it did not strike me as odd at the time that the word cockpit was never used. If we were to ask, I wonder what flight attendants think of that term.

I wasn't terrified in the least when the passengers were all tuck in and the safety precautions explained. In fact, I secretly wished that the plane depressurized and we had to wear the oxygen mask. That's what astronauts did wasn't it?

The doors were closed. My ears told me that the cabin was being pressurized and then the low whining noise as the first of the four motors was spooled up. Then the second, then the third and … then the fourth. You could just feel the energy building. For a split second I regretted not having a window seat.

Then the plane did something unexpected. It moved backwards! But of course, we had to be pushed back from the terminal. The plane stopped for a moment, but it seemed a lot longer. Then it started the lumbering roll along the apron and then to the end of the runway. There was not another aircraft to be seen and so the plane turned and then stopped.

We remained stopped there for a few minutes as the stewardesses checked everything was fine, then I saw one of them go to telephone and say something then sat down, replace the receiver and then strapped herself in. What a well-oiled machine!

And then we were on our way. The plane began to slowly roll .., bouncing a bit under its own weight, but for the first few second it didn't seem to be going very fast. Then it went faster and then faster and then faster and then wee ... we were tilting back a bit and then some more and then the bouncing stop and the plane literally surged into the air.

There was a whiz and a whine and then two thuds and then we were on our way (the landing gears no doubt). We climbed and we climbed and we climbed as if we were never to stop lifting our selves into the air. So much for climbing a tall tree. This was the thing.

I wasn't even scared ... really I wasn't. I had met the pilot and he seemed to know what he is doing. I closed my eyes and could sense the motion of the plane better that way and so I kept my eyes closed and the gentle rocking put me to asleep.

Even today when I travel by air I still do this routine. On one trip a lady in a seat across the isle from me asked me how I could do this. I told her that it just doesn't make any sense to get sacred on an airplane. If something happens you'll be the second to know. And

what will you be able to do about it? I don't think that calmed her nerves one iota.

I don't know how long I had been asleep, but then my sister started to cry and that didn't matter. I was awake and taking in the excitement and thrill of our journey by air across Canada!

The whole passenger routine of air flight hasn't changed much over the years, which tells me that when they set the routine down they got it correct from the start. The later addition of in flight head phones, music and then video well, that was an incremental change not a very substantive one.

The only step backwards has been in the replacement of real dishes and utensil with paper and plastic. There is something luxurious in being served on proper china with proper knives and forks and of course a decent cup and saucer to have your coffee in.

Murphy is of course an air traveller. Have you noticed that turbulence always seems to begin moments before a meal is served and ends movements after the remnants are gathered!

I watched the whole drama unfold. It was a circus in a can. The first few hours fly by quickly and then I noticed that the plane started to nose down a bit, then the pilot cam on over the intercom. "we are starting our descent to Toronto."

Toronto! Who wants to go to Toronto! I was on my way to Montreal.

I got up out of my seat and went to the rear of the plane, where all the stewardesses were and found my favourite one.

“Yes dear …” she asked. If she had a pocket I would have liked to be taken home in it.

“Why are we landing in Toronto?” I said almost pleading

“Passengers need to get off there,” she calmly responded.

“But … but … I want to go to Expo!”

“Oh … well … we need to stop in Toronto for an hour, let some passengers off, refuel, take some new passengers on board and then we fly to Montreal so you can go to Expo.”

I was relieved. Who wanted to get off at dumb old Toronto anyhow.

“Oh,” She continued as if an afterthought, “… and the pilot says you can visit the flight deck when we are on the ground in Toronto.”

I had thought he had forgotten, he being busy flying the airplane. My smile probably said it all. And with a brand spanking unopened roll of life savers, she guided me back to my seat and buckled me back in.

My mother hadn't even noticed I was gone, until the stewardess brought me back. She really didn't believe the stewardess that I was being a good little boy, until the stewardess let the cat out of the bag and said that since I was on such good behaviour the pilot had invited "the young gentleman to visit the flight deck".

That's when all hell broke loose. My older brother insisted that he be invited and that he first! The stewardess held her ground and said that only the pilot can make arrangements to visit the flight deck. Well, either he went first or he would not go at all.

About thirty minutes after landing in Toronto … I enjoyed my solitary visit. I got to sit in the co-pilot's seat and had the pilot explain some of the instruments to me. This was long before digital flight instruments and fly by wire. The pilot even reset the altimeter, having first asked the tower over the hand held mike, for an update on the atmospheric pressure. Now that was fun.

After the visit to the flight deck the stewardess and I stood by the open front door to the DC-8 and watched the hustle and bustle of Toronto International Airport.

She looked sort of tired. I think she enjoyed the chance to breath in some outside air. It was fresh mind you, because it carried the faint odour of combusted kerosene. Without turning to her I said, " you work hard."

She looked down … “its my job dear.”

I looked up at her and then gave her a hug, well kind of a hug. More like a squeeze to her hip and two legs. Then she surprised me!

With a big smile on her face she picked me right off the ground and carried me back to my seat. I was chunky for my age and so that was no mean feat! I had my hands around her neck and my legs were wrapped around her hip. It seemed so personal. I felt as light as a feather.

From that moment, I have had a soft spot for flight attendants ever since. They work hard and aren’t appreciated nearly to the extent they deserve. But what a way to make a living! Be a flight attendant and see the world. Better than joining the navy if you are a young woman.

In over four decades of flying I have had many a pleasant trip with flight attendants, and even turned away the occasional invitations to “share a cab” after some flights down in the states. I was in my thirties and married at the time. I know that sometimes the stewardesses are lonely too. On some later return flights home, it was always nice to see I was remembered in a kind sort of way.

Back to 1967 now. In short order we were buttoned up again (an expression I picked up from my visit to the flight deck) and on our way to Montreal.

When we arrived and landed who was there at the front to set us on our way but the pilot. I stopped to shake his hand and thank him for the nice flight. In the pre-911 ear I continued to do this custom. The world has changed since then.

We disembarked down the stairs (this was before airports had enclosed walkways) into a dark, wet and cold night, into a city that was unfamiliar and strange. This was a prelude to the next exciting adventure.

At the bottom of the stairs I stepped aside and looked up. There she was at the top of the stairs. I waved but she didn't see me at first. I guess I was just another face in the crowd.

But by stopping I was holding up everyone else behind me. She glanced down the stairs.

I waved a second time. She waved back and I carried on my way.

So ended my first trip of a lifetime.

Chapter 10 – A Little Man and His World

Centennial year 1967 was a year unlike any other in the first century of Canada. The country was young, and so were its citizens. Canadians were optimistic and enthusiastic. Our Institutions were strong and well respected. Queen Elizabeth was in her forties. We had a Nobel Peace Prize winner, Lester Bowles Pearson, as Prime Minister. The world was Canada's oyster.

And there I was, a brash and naïve six year old, right smack dab in the centre of all this optimism and enthusiasm. The morning after our arrival in Montreal I had rolled down the stairs early to venture forth to seize the day.

There in the kitchen was my glamorous French Canadian grand mother, smoking a cigarette and drinking a giant French style cup of coffee. She didn't speak a word of English, "mais je peut parler un peu Francais. Ca bien passé."

All her life she would enjoy going shopping to Eaton's Department Store, a bastion of English Canada in the heart of French Montreal, and insist she be served in English. And they would accommodate her.

Breakfast for the great Canadian Adventurer: Scrambled eggs with maple syrup and toast with maple butter! Yes please. Toast are roti in french by the way.

Everything about my grandparents' home, a shared duplex on Lucerne Road in Mont Royal, was exotic. The television programming was in French, the newspapers, groceries, radio and things. Mon dieu!

Just as I finished by breakfast treat the door bell rang. "Go see who it is" my grandmother said. My mother would never trust me to answer the door! And so I did. When I opened the front door, there stood a familiar yet strange man.

Familiar because he looked a bit like my grandfather, but strange because he was not him. It was his brother Charles. My grandmother called out form the kitchen, come in, it seems she had a clear view of the front door from her vantage point in the kitchen and so she had kept an eye on me.

And so, for the one and only time in my life I remember encountering the man, I met Charles Auguste St. Arnaud, uncle, professional journalist, and in that year the Queen's Printer in Ottawa.

His suit was crumpled, as was the norm. He seemed to look like he was in a rush, but, nonetheless he was well turned out, with his distinguished dark rimmed professional glasses. Uncle Charles

patted me on the head. "You must be one of Micheline's boys." "Patrick?" I nodded.

My grandmother was calling out for my uncle to not make much noise. She pointed up towards the second floor. "The others are still asleep."

Uncle Charles kept his shoes on and he led us both quietly into the kitchen, where my grandmother had already poured him a cup of coffee and had set a second plate for breakfast.

He was expected and I guess the breakfast made for me was in fact an antipasta of sorts, a little less on his plate to put on mine. No matter. I sat with him as he chatted in English with me and in French with my grandmother. A dozen good questions … as a journalist was prone to ask … that covered the who, what, where when and why of things. I imagined if he was on company time he would have had his little black reporter's book out taking notes.

Years later, after he was gone, I would be told that while he was a journalist Charles would disappear to the far corners of the world chasing a story with nothing more than a tooth brush and his razor in one jacket pocket, and his passport, charge card and journalist' note book in the other. Talk about traveling light.

As we sat at the breakfast table, as if summoned by his voice my mother suddenly appeared, pregnant belly and all (my younger sister

would be born two months after our Expo trip). Uncle Charles was her god father, and so they were happy to see each other and catch up with several years of news.

I knew not to try to get in the way of gossip and so after a few minutes I left the kitchen went down to study and turned on the television. The programming was so different and they had so many channels, including some US channels!

After a few minutes I came across the cartoon Hercules, which I had never seen before, and which even today triggers tidal waves of nostalgia. Every day during our visit to Montreal I religiously watched Hercules as part of my morning ritual. The nostalgia was imprinted very Pavlovian I guess.

Uncle Charles stayed for a short visit and then disappeared without saying good bye. Oh well, he was a busy man. A few days later the visiting President of France would utter his infamous “Vivre le Quebec Libre”.

I was told many years later by a knowledgeable political insider in Ottawa that it was my uncle Charles who at the request of the Rt. Hon. Prime Minister of Canada, brought to his old French friend the message either apologize or pack his bags … he packed his bags.

They Chucked Charles de Gaule out. De Gaule "shot the messenger" so to speak and so may have ended a lifetime's friendship between the two Charles.

It took much of the morning to roust out the rest of us visiting interlopers but my Grand Mother did not seem to mind. She had, after all, raised seven children, so four plus one and a half wasn't quite up to the mark.

It was a nice hot and surprisingly humid day. In Edmonton you don't get humid air. But in the lee of the St. Lawrence, you can in fact smell the water. It is so humid in Montreal.

I went out to sit in the back. The sun appeared so much brighter to me, maybe because everything was so novel that I had my eyes wide open. I admired the tall Maple trees and wondered which one had provided me with the breakfast treat. Yes … so I am a little naïve, but when you are young you have much to learn.

Then, something scurried across the back lawn and made a dash for me. I just had enough time to run back in and slam the door behind me. It was a rat sporting a long bushy tail.

"What's wrong?" my grand mother asked me. I pointed out through the open screen of the back door. She looked. "Oh that's just Charlie." He's waiting to be fed by your grand father." Can't get more exotic than feeding rats with bushy tails. Boy, the customs here in

Montreal are rather strange. “C’est un écureuil” … I had to ask for a translation … It’s a squirrel. Funny looking thing. Rack that one up to mother nature.

When my grand father came home from work that afternoon, early I may add, my grand mother told him of my fright and he took me out to the back lawn and introduced me to Charlie. He had named his pet squirrel after his older brother! I had heard brothers calling their others brats, but never a squirrel. It was, of course, all in jest.

I had to trust my grandfather enough to let him place a shelled peanut in my mouth at which the squirrel ran up one lag, sat on my shoulder reached over for the peanut and as he eyed me and I him, we probably wondered who of us two were the more scared.

Believe me don’t try this at home. I flinched and Charlie took off in a flash, down my other leg, across the lawn and up the tree still clutching the cherished peanut. I was frozen in place with fear.

As cute as it might be, it was still a rat with a bushy tail. That afternoon I decided being a veterinarian was not my preferred profession.

Many years later I would recount this funny story to neighbours in North Vancouver, Senator and Mrs. Perrault, to their great amusement. They too had a similar view of bushy tailed creatures who were digging up their garden and feasting on their prized bulbs.

The many remembrances of my grand parents home includes the giant pool table in the basement, the wood work shop that my grandfather had, his long drafting table built into the wall, and a complete collection of National Geographic magazines going back to the early 1930's.

My French Canadian grandfather would teach me the rudiments of pool by first teaching me the rudiments of physics. It all started with the word Inertia, which he was surprised I knew.

He told me the story of how Isaac Newton solved the pool problem, and why when one ball hits another, the first comes to a rest while the second continues on with the momentum of the first. The visual proof we see in the popular physics demonstration known as Newton's cradle, or what some crudely call "*Newton's Balls*".

He also explained to me how, with this solution, Isaac Newton would elucidate the theories of Conservation of Momentum and Conservation of Energy, and establish once and for all the validity of his three laws to the Royal Society in London. By the end of the summer I was an accomplished pool player thanks to my maternal grandfather.

Despite being cautioned to not play in his work shop unsupervised I ventured in one morning when I was bored and started to whittle.

After two or three pulls of the sharp knife on a piece of wood it slipped and then sliced a flap of skin off the thumb on my left hand.

I dropped everything and ran up the stairs into the kitchen and there stood one of my aunts, my mother's sister Nicole who studied me with some understanding (she had a son of her own two years older than me). She had been sitting having a coffee and smoking a cigarette (everyone seemed to smoke in Montreal).

"What's wrong?" Blood was dripping from my left hand.

"Rien … (nothing)." I was caught between being caught doing something I was told not to do, to having hurt myself doing something I was told not to do. Boys will be boys.

"T'est sur (are you sure)…"

"Oui".

"You're dripping blood … were you down in the work shop …"

"Maybe …"

"Let's see". I showed her my hand.

"Oh that's wonderful. Let's do some exploratory surgery!"

“Ahhhhhhhhhh”. The vision of someone poking around my already damaged and bleeding thumb kind of threw me more than the fact that I had hurt it to begin with.

Credit to my Tante Nicole, for she had not only had formal training as a nurse, she knew a thing or two about child psychology. She had my undivided attention and my fullest cooperation.

I was bandaged up in no time and was also set on the straight and narrow. No more unsupervised projects in the wood shop. My grandfather liked making tools for his seven children and enjoyed it even more making toys for his growing gaggle of grandchildren.

Later that day, after cleaning the floor of his workshop of the incriminating puddle of my blood, he set about making the three of us grandchildren toys which we played with during the rest of our visit. Mine was a funny little airplane.

He was also an avid chess player and so he sat me down to teach me the rudiments of the game of chess. Many years later, as he lay dying of lung cancer, he made sure that his prized chessboard and chess pieces would be his gift to me.

His prized chessboard and chess pieces sit unused … I cannot seem to bring myself to play the game any more.

As for his prized collection of National Geographic, I think I sat and looked through each and every one of the editions during our visit. You do the math … thirty some years … twelve editions per year … it was made also the more pleasant by the cold hard floor in the basement which was a respite from the hot and humid air outside.

You can learn a great deal about the world reading National Geographic and see a lot too. The most fascinating thing in that first look at the world was the lives of the primitives, and aboriginals scattered around the world.

There was a logic to not having to dress up and not having to do all those other things that grow ups do in our modern society. Why do we even wear socks? Most of us, when we are growing up, long for such a world without civilized restrictions and inhibitions. That's probably why places like Club Med are so popular.

That evening for a celebratory dinner my grandfather and I were sent to pick a pizza up. It was a super giant deluxe from the best Italian Restaurant in Montreal.

I remember the trek well because we took my grandfather's Oldsmobile convertible and I sat in the back seat on the passenger side holding the monstrously warm and aromatic pizza on my lap as we drove back. I had short pants on and the box nearly scalded my unprotected knees.

But when us hunter gathers returned the St. Arnaud family had all arrived and the opening of the box which was as big as the kitchen table and the presentation of the prize was indescribable. I had never seen such a fantastic pizza before and imagine I have not ever since. It had everything right down to anchovies.

And then out came a Chianti wine, wicker basket and all, and wine was poured and the visitors feted and we were all introduced to the other aunts and cousins and well, the whole things was right out of a French film. I even got a small glass of wine! Family, pizza and wine.

But the thing that stuck in my mind was the pizza. It wasn't just the works, it was a work of culinary art! Thank heaven for the Italians! Even though I now know I am both lactose and gluten intolerant, I still cannot resist a good piazza and sometimes feel I need to indulge.

And, well, anchovies. I know its an acquired taste but that night in '67 I acquired a taste for those noble little creatures and enjoy slipping them into my meal whenever and where ever possible. Ever tried anchovies on scrambled eggs? And a Caesar salad just aint' a Caesar salad, without anchovies in the dressing and on the salad itself. Take that you purists!

The following morning was to be our first trek to Expo '67 and "Man and his World". And I had indigestion and a hang over!

Every day brought a new adventure. Today's adventure wasn't just a visit to Man and his world, it was the taking of the Montreal Metro to Expo '67. We were driven as a family, with us little kings and queens in the Oldsmobile to the metro station, me dressed in my short pants, and leather sandals, with a tag around my wrist, if lost return to sender … and a nickel in my pocket, a whole nickel (I knew the value of things … you could but five whole double bubble, bubble gums with a nickel) that we could only spend on a telephone call to my grandparent's house if by chance we got lost.

The Montréal Metro, well, that was as much fun as the Air Canada flight to Montréal to begin with. I can still hear the sound of the metro cars as they came and left the station. If you have never experienced something like this, the whole thing was incredible.

It would be a decade before rapid transit would find its way to Edmonton, and two decades before it got as far as Vancouver, then in time for Expo '86. Having visited both the '67 and the '86 Expos, I think the Montréal one had it hands down over the Vancouver one. Expo '86 was fun, that I grant you, but Expo '67 was fantastic!

After a short and exciting trip on the Metro, too short I thought at the time, then we were there. At the gates to paradise on one of the islands in the St' Lawrence River.

Expo '67 was a hustling and bustling metropolis comprised of the entire world. Anyone who has visited one of the world expositions

knows of what I speak. It is a traveling circus without the tents. It is refined humanity at its best. It is the chance for nations to be good citizens of the world.

Here was a place to be anything but a primitive, I thought. Merci Mr. Drapeau!

Every pavilion we visited was a wonderful experience, but the one pavilion that stands out in my mind even today was the US Pavilion with its R. Buckminister Fuller "Biosphere Dome" and its focus on the US space program.

There was an Apollo capsule hanging from the rafters with three of its huge parachutes deployed, there was a mock up of the LEM, or lunar excursion module that would be used two years later by Armstrong and Aldin on their actual moon landing and there was a real surveyor moon lander, the back up for one of the moon flights, sitting next to the LEM in one of the displays.

I took a greater interest in the Surveyor moon lander as an actual space ship than the LEM mock up and well, seeing an actual Apollo spacecraft kind of put the whole scale of things into perspective.

The Saturn V rocket was the ultimate example of human industry and ingenuity, but it was also a measure of man's inefficiency as well. The capsule was the 5 % of the whole thing that made it back to earth, and the astronauts, perhaps 0.5 % of the whole enterprise.

It's hard for even a six year old not to think "*why send a man where a machine could do the job*"? As I studied the surveyor spacecraft closely, I thought that while in 1967 people were waiting for man to step on the moon, in actual fact, the first man on the moon was back on earth watching a TV camera operating a remote manipulator on the first surveyor to land on the moon.

For a clever six year old it was obvious that the Space Race between the US and the USSR, was a great race but that practicality played second fiddle to politics. It would have made more long term sense to put a permanent space station in orbit and then moved onto the moon.

But nonetheless the whole thing, the Space Race and the Race to the Moon, made for great drama and even greater television.

We visited "Man and His World" three times over two weeks. I thoroughly enjoyed each of the visits and have been a supporter of the International Exhibition ever since.

When criticism was directed towards organizers of the 1986 International Exhibition in Vancouver, I did not hesitate to stand up and show my support for the endeavours, the same as well as for the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver. Such international undertakings are of great importance for the community of nations and for the countries who host them.

The one other special event that summer was an uncle, Jean Guy, who had graduated from catholic Seminary School and who was to be invested as a Jesuit Priest.

He gave his first mass that summer, and we in our best Sunday dress, stood proudly as he said the mass in Latin. It's a pity that Latin isn't taught anymore.

My uncle the Jesuit would go on to be the Director of a CEGEP in Montreal, do missionary work amongst the poor in Quebec and in Vietnam and would spend some time in the Vatican.

He would also author a number of excellent books on Theology and Philosophy. He is a scholar in the true sense of the word and one of the finest humanitarians I have met in my lifetime.

As we packed and prepared for our return to Edmonton and our run of the mill lives there I could tell that my mother would miss her family and the exciting metropolis had she grown up in. The large St. Arnaud family were all there at the airport to will us on our way home, including my uncle the Jesuit. Just as we were leaving for the plane he taught me some latin …

Pax Vobiscum.

Chapter 11 – A Fine September Morning in ‘67

At last the day had arrived. It was the first Tuesday in September, 1967.

At last I was off to my first day at school, well my first official day for as you already know I had played interloper many times over the past year. Years later the phrase “first Tuesday in November” would cause me pangs of nostalgia back to my first day of school when it came to the 1984 re-election campaign of a very unique President, Ronald Reagan.

Why this would be the case I still do not know many years later. Perhaps it related to some of the pomp and ceremony to the day. Perhaps it was merely that everything that could have been done to prepare for that day had been done and what would to happen would happen. What is that lovely Doris Day song “que cera … cera …” . I knew for certain that my life would never be the same again.

As the hot and sunny days of that summer of 1966 drifted past I had counted down first the weeks then the days to the start of the school year. On the calendar I had stuck to our fridge I had marked the first day “*Dea primus*” with a big red circle.

The night before I had carefully set out my things and checked them a half dozen times before I fell asleep. Clean underwear, white shirt,

pants, socks, sweater, even a checkered bow tie that matched the colour of the sweater (mind you this was put on the pile by my mother). The bow tie was fashionable then because the Prime Minister of the Day wore them. Everything had to be perfect.

When the day finally arrived I was awake long before the sun rose. We know of external time, but we also have an internal time and our internal clock is known to play tricks. When I finally fell asleep I thought I had slept a full night through.

Then I woke with a start. Bing … fully awake. This had never happened to me before. I bolted out of bed and hurried to the kitchen to check the time. Oh my god, what a disappointment! It was only 4:45 am! And I wasn't sleepy. I quietly turned on the TV and got only static (this was before the era of reruns and 24 hour cable programming). Not much else to do except watch the clock …

The adage that a watched kettle never boils applies equally to clocks with second hands. If you have ever stared at a clock for any length of time in the dark I can attest they can be mesmerizing. If you ever want to play a parlour trick and mimic *Mesmer* ask a friend to stare at an old clock and repeat over and over "you are getting sleepy, very sleepy."

As I sat on the kitchen floor and urged the clock to get on with it I fell back asleep. In fact, I fell asleep sitting up on the floor. I had never

done that before! Have you? When my parents started to stir around 5:15 I awoke with a start.

For a moment I could not remember how it came that I was where I was. I snuck back into my bed and lay on my back staring at the shadow of the morning as it crept across the ceiling. With time I would have a fondness for poems that spoke of shadows marking the passage of time and even have wrote a few poems myself along similar lines.

What an inauspicious start to the rest of my life. My better judgement, if a young boy can be said to have such a thing, told me to stay put and wait until the smell of percolated coffee had drifted into my room (actually it was our room, my brother and I had a bunk bed, oldest on the top). By the time it had drifted across the house my parents would have had their morning cup and would be ready for our rambunctious entrance.

That morning I wanted to make the triumphant trek to St. Bride's elementary school all by myself, a studious Caesar out to slew his ignorance. By now, God knows, by hook or by crook I knew the way!

But school policy required each new student to be accompanied to their first class by a parent. My mother was just a few short days away from giving birth to a new baby and life for her was very trying and challenging.

But … yes we had to be there. Truancy was still a matter of public concern then, and the school boards had their truancy officers tracking down the wayward.

The parents on the first day of school thing I guess a policy that was there for a reason. The school didn't want to be over run by an infestation of parentless gypsy children. But, psst we weren't to realize until perhaps fourth grade that teachers are there mostly as custodians and less so educators. Then as now as forever, come on, which child in their right mind would choose school over a day of "quality programming?"

Well I guess, I wasn't in my right mind. I looked forward to and loved school!

Over breakfast things went from bad to worst. My sister fussed, as usual (she would never change). My brother played alpha-male (a role he perfected – he would never change). My father was in a rush and late for work (work would remain a focus of his life well past mandatory retirement – can't blame him for being a workaholic with his background and all), and my mother, well she sort of wanted to savour the moment.

I guess in retrospect I should have understood what my mother was thinking, but all I could think that morning was "Let's get with it … team." She insisted I wear the bow tie. As she straightened the bow tie I let my mantra slide just for expediency mind you. As she readied

me for my first day of school I imagine she was thinking, two down one and perhaps a second to go.

Once we children were all safely ensconced in school (a fourth would make her expected and welcomed appearance three weeks later) she would return to teaching and would also finish a Master's.

My mother looked after us children and so the chore fell onto her to make the six block trek from our home to the school, with a complaining kindergartener and two school aged boys in tow. My brother was tail end Charlie this morning, taking his sweet time just to annoy me.

We stepped out of the front door of our house perhaps ten minutes late. My mother had to leave us for a moment to return in the house to retrieve her keys. When she returned there were still a small hiccup, (my sister needed to ahum … powder her nose). Finally, a full twenty minutes behind schedule we began the second of our epic trek.

I remember it was a fine September morning – not too hot, not too cold, just right. It was a nice Indian summer of a day. We were finally on our way.

As we walked up the street a number of our elderly neighbours bore witness to this ritual progression. First one block up and then two blocks over. I tried hard to stay cool, literally and figuratively, but it was just not possible not to perspire. I was getting nervous. Great!

We passed a few doors down from our old duplex and who was in front racking up some leaves but the German Landlord. When he saw me he didn't wave … being the gentleman that he was he doffed his hat in tribute. I waved back. Today I am happy to see hats coming back in fashion, along with good manners. When ever I see a good chapeau I sometimes think of this man and wonder what came of him and his convenient life.

Trek half completed there still remained a crossing of the busy thoroughfare, which one would find treacherous even at the well marked cross walk, crossing guard, flashing light and all. The crossing guard by now knew me well for he had strict instructions from both my mother and the school Principal not to let me cross the street.

As we walked to school that norning, time and time again I eagerly rushed ahead, only to be firmly told to wait until the rest of the gypsy caravan had caught up. I got to the crossing guard all by myself having left my mother, sister and older brother nearly a block behind. The crossing guard, well he did his duty and stood his ground. "Go back home" he huffed swinging the stop sign menacingly. "I won't let you past", he puffed.

He kinda reminded me of the old wolf in a popular children's tale. I'll huff and I'll puff … Try as I must to reason with the man, he did not believe me when I said that I really was late to my first day of school

today. With my bow tie and frame of mind, if I had had myself a pocket watch I might have pulled it out and lamented on the tardiness of things.

At last, when the rest of the caravan of us gypsies arrived and the whole things sorted out he still made us wait. What's the adage, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

From this day forward I knew whenever he felt I was in a hurry he would slow things down and so with time I took to being nonchalant and ignoring his machination, a good strategy best applied to encounters with other alpha-males. With time his angst would be focused on some other poor student. Maybe he just wanted to feel wanted?

We majestically crossed the street, a Queen, two jokers and the deuce of spades. If this were a horse race we were now onto the last quarter mile and we were in a' rear.

As we got closer and closer to the school I noticed more and more children. That made sense, I know. As they rushed to catch up with their friends, as they started to clog the sidewalks and even walk on the streets, I imagined that the school was a bar magnet with its field lines drawing in all the elementary school children in the area.

Even as a young boy it seems I had the rudiments of scientific thinking. Today, as a physicist I know to describe the whole process as a transport problem, with the flux proportional to the driving force.

Getting into the school was like trying to fight one's way into the big top on circus day. My brother disappeared to his appointed classroom. My sister insisted she be carried and I had to hold onto my mother's hand, something I minded even though I knew the way. Down we went to the sous-sol, and a quick right and we were there … well almost.

The year before I had to bear witness to my brother's initiation into the brotherhood of the first grade. The previous September I felt that I could sit down and join the crowd. I was ready. I knew my ABC's and could read and write and all that. But no … I was too young. I had to wait a whole year. Eleven months separated my brother and I in age but at times like that it seemed much more. What's the adage made popular by a spy sitcom in the 60's "missed it by that much chief …".

Today when we arrived at the door of the first grade classroom we found our way blocked by a kid jam as two or three reluctant children held close to their parents including one boy with thick bottle cap glasses who steadfastly held onto his mother's blue and white striped dress with such a fist that his fingers were turning white and his grab was nearly impossible for his mother to open. I had seen him in our

neighbourhood not too far from our old duplex but never talked with him before.

Now we were really late! I looked past the clog and saw into my new classroom. Yes, I know I had already been there before but today it looked newer and brighter and more inviting. After all it was mine.

I turned to look at boy with the glasses and when he noticed I was looking at him he let go of his mother's dress and entered the room. I guess he recognized me from the neighbourhood. His name was Jimmy. Over the course of the year we would find out that he was by far the most introverted boy in the first grade.

He and I would find we shared an interest in science and would from time to time walk home from school, discussing our newest scientific discoveries. He became the Wizard of St. Bride's, the Steinmetz in his taming of lightening, and was very adept at electronics, whether tubes or transistors were involved.

In fourth grade, I remember we would steal into the science prep room and put together a series of electric bells which went off the next time someone opened the prep room door. He was also good at things like picking locks and card tricks. I wonder what he is doing now? My guess a super electrical engineer or a physicist.

Back to the classroom now. After a moment of controlled confusion the teacher asked the mothers to stand over by the far wall while all

us children stood in a row at the front. The teacher introduced herself to us and then told us what we were about to do. She was going to read out our names and then walk us to a desk.

Each student was assigned a stand alone old style oak desk, the kind you could find in schools from one end of Canada to the other. We new arrivals were each designated their desk in alphabetical order. Even before my name was called I was paying close attention to the names of my classmates. Many names were of European extraction, like myself.

Having a surname starting with a B placed me high up the queue. I remember my desk well. Second desk from the front, second row over from the window, Right in front of me was the teacher's desk. A pretty fine start to this horse race!

The teacher took me by the hand. I noticed how soft her hand was and that she was wearing orange fingernail polish. When I arrived at my new desk (well not new in the absolute sense just the relative sense) I politely thanked her and sat down to watch the rest of the horse race.

And what a horse race! In front of me now sat a girl with blonde hair and a pony tail wearing a cotton white dress with blue stripes. Behind me sat a girl with short vampish black hair and the blackest eyes I had ever seen. She wore a light pink dress with a bow.

Years later I would see her likeness in the face of Liv Tyler. And in front of me, perhaps Jennifer Anniston's younger sister with freckles and a most superbly shaped mouth and rosy cheeks. I smiled at them both and they both smiled back. The dark haired girl called me Peter … the other corrected her … no its Patrick! They both giggled and I joined them. So began the play for my heart and soul.

Their real names I have long forgotten. Sadly I am hit and miss as far as names are concerned. Incidentally, if I got a nickel for every occasion someone called me Peter I would have a large jar of nickels.

Our close and convenient arrangements would last for most of the rest of the month of September until I was moved to the back of the row to make room for Jimmy and his poor eyesight and bottle cap glasses. Also, I suspected I was so advanced in my reading skills and school work that the teacher felt I didn't need much supervision.

In short order lovely Liv traded her desk to sit in front of me (she loved to day dream) and equally lovely Jennifer ended up sitting third up from the end of this row (she was an independent type and stayed on task). After that we played musical chairs the three of us and we remained good friends throughout first grade.

My first grade teacher was really not what I expected. My nightmare was that my first teacher would be an elderly lady well past her prime and surviving with strict rules.

In actual fact my first grade teacher was a young vibrant and incredible lady who made a lasting impression on everyone by greeting us on our first day in her classroom wearing an orange dress with matching orange lipstick.

She was younger than my mother, how much younger any one's guess. She was also a new teacher, fresh from teacher's college, someone with the energy and enthusiasm to keep us on the path to a good and proper education.

At the end of the first year as we left her care she told us that we were her first students. Hopefully her first time was a rewarding as my first time. It was 1967 and everything seemed so new. She really fitted in.

The classroom I walked into in 1967 is perhaps gone forever in Canada. There was a picture of the Queen at the front of the class, a large map of the Dominion of Canada and we sang O Canada every Monday morning. We respected our elders and our only expectation was that we become good and decent Citizens of this greta country.

One of the first persons to whom I announced my arrival at school was the librarian. Damned if I understood why she was pleased to see me. She found me standing in front of her desk, instead of hiding in the stacks, with a few choice books under my arm ready to be signed out.

“This your first day at school.“ I nodded. “You have some books to take out?” I held them up and nodded a second time. “You going to say anything? “ I played mute and nodded a third time.

She stared down from behind her counter, an imposing figure of perhaps a metre sixty tall. From a catch-all jar full of knick knacks she produced a big fat red pencil, the one first grade students learn to use and handed it to me.

The moment we have both waited for, for months … I proudly and carefully wrote my name on one of the borrowing cards trying for once to stay between the lines and handed it back to her. She looked at it for a moment and nodded before diplomatically took the other cards from me and writing my name in the rest of the borrowing cards for me.

In a snap she placed the cards into a small oak box. Then she coughed a nervous cough put up the sign “Back in five Minutes” and walked out from behind the counter. Together we sauntered to the door of the library and stopped at the threshold.

At the door to the library we paused. She looked down at me and patted my head. “From now on you’ll behave in my library won’t you.” Ambiguously I smiled and said nothing before turning and walking down the hallway to the stairs leading to the front door of the school.

When I got to the end of the hallway I stopped and looked back. There she was watching me. I waved. She waved back before dashing in the other direction to the staff room no doubt for her cigarette fix.

A flashback to a film I had watched during the summer came to mind. What is that line from the Hollywood classic Casablanca, as Rick and Reynold walk into the mist at the closing scene …

“this is a start of a beautiful relationship.”

Chapter 12 – The Great Turkey Shoot

The excitement of my first day in first grade seems to have given me false hope as we settled into the tedium of alphabet learning, practice letters, counting apples and all the other things left to the uninitiated. I guess they had some catching up. Maybe not everyone. The three of us in our row seemed to be on top the letters, reading and art.

Every few days our workbooks were collected and we would keep count, now that we really count, of the gold, silver and copper stars we were given for our work. The Olympic podium seemed to have all three of us standing tall, in a sort of Olympic musical chairs.

When we started our arithmetic, that's when I stepped ever so slightly ahead of my friends. Before I knew it I was helping them with the "subtract the apples" exercises. The both ganged up on me and decided in the measure of things, art would count for more than arithmetic. Who was I to argue. To begin with, little did my two close friends know that I was pretty good at art too.

I had a mother who enjoyed and understood art. In her children she tried to instilled an interest in art from an early age. Or perhaps it was just busy work to keep us occupied and out of trouble (one day I should perhaps ask). In my adult years I would inherit some of her art books and art supplies. From time to time I would in turn invite her to once again take up her interest in art with a gift of sketch

paper, pastels, and coffee table art books. She grew up with Picasso and so he was her favourite.

I do remember the wall next to the door where each of us had a bronze hook to hang our coats and put our street shoes and all. Each hook had our name written beneath it in a bronze holder in cardstock. For some of the children they took their time learning their names and so had to be helped along. Some of us knew how to read our names and took to helping the other read their name plates or look after their coats, boots, gloves and stuff. I don't think a scarf or glove ever went astray in the classroom. Outside in the playing field that was another matter. In the winter months parents donated winter clothes to see that we had an adequate reserve to keep us youngsters safe from the sub zero cold of Prairie winters.

In the classroom we had to either wear running shoes or just slippers. The whole tights things that girls had worked to their advantage. They would never lose or misplaced a sock. Depending on whether they were cold or hot they would add or subtract to their attire. Woe to anyone who brought water, snow or mud into the classroom. Their punishment was to clean the mess up immediately.

When it came in arts and craft in the class, not being a competitive type I just did my own thing. I had a live and let live attitude. Besides I had a running start with my paper airplanes, drawings skills and summer classes at the art gallery. I do remember vividly the day we made arts and craft turkeys just a few days prior to Canadian

Thanksgiving. It was a production that kept us occupied for an hour at the very least. On came the smocks. Out came the paint, paper, blunt head scissors and away we went. The teacher milled around us like a proud hen to her keep.

The turkey feather tail was a painted shape with the outline of our small left hand and the rest of the bird was made of crumpled coloured paper glued to the paper with the ubiquitous while glue. I being different did my right hand because I was naturally left handed.

The colours chosen for the feathers was quite revealing. Liv chose an earthy colour. Jennifer a pink and me well lime green. Not because I thought it was a most appropriate colour but because I let Liv and Jenn chose before me. We had been so preoccupied with something else that we were the last to choose from the box of colours.

Liv's choice was a cracked corner of a well used paint cake, which said a lot about her. Jennifer's a round paint cake had a fissure hollowed out it. Mine was still in the wrapper, having never been used. The colour was quite hideous which probably explained why it had been passed over.

At the back of the room we had a sink and basin for wash-up. Having been taught proper painting etiquette I took the time to clean my brush thoroughly before use, getting rid of old caked on colours. I think I might have even trimmed a few stray hairs on the brush. Then

I slowly prepared the paint cake with just a small amount of water and prepared the pigment.

By the time I was ready to put brush to canvas both Liv and Jennifer were finished. That didn't bother me for I knew to take my time and produce a good painting. That was, after all, what I spent the week in the summer doing. They watched me amusingly. You are such a girl Liv said. I responded that she was such a boy.

That angered her and she flicked some of her brown paint at me. Sure enough some of her paint flew across my painting.

Her eyes grew as big as plates. I knew she immediately regretted what she had done. I was indifferent really. After all it was just a painted turkey for god sakes. I took my paintbrush and painted two large lime green dimples on her cheek. Jenn joined in and painted a pink dimple on her chin. Before we knew it we had painted each other's faces with brown, pink and lime green dimples.

Then we noticed the other students were quietly staring at us. I imagine they already thought us a little daft to begin with. Our teacher who had had her back to us suddenly turned and saw what we had done.

She burst out laughing and rushed to her desk dug out her Polaroid instamatic camera and took a picture of the three of us. I would give a King's ransom for that Polaroid snap.

By that point we had run out of time and so we had to finish up and clean up. Each of us had to write our names carefully at the right hand corner of our masterpiece.

When the teacher's back was turned I surreptitiously wrote my name out with my left hand. That gaucheness would of course be drummed out of me by the system. Left handed students morphed into right handed conformists.

I don't think I ever finished that Turkey, but what does it really matter. It was just a silly painted Turkey. When I took it home I finished it off with a flourish and presented it to my mother. She put it on the front of the fridge for a day or so before one of my siblings, he will remain nameless, managed to cause it to fall off the fridge, then step and mangle it so that one of his drawings from school was placed there instead.

About five years ago I visited my first grade nephew's elementary school and lo and behold the practice of the painted turkey continues to this day. For me that was reassuring at so many levels.

The three of us, Liv, Jenn and I, took to breaking the tedium of school with our own antics. We also helped each other with our schoolwork. The sad thing was that we each lived far apart in different directions and so we rarely saw each outside of school.

Chapter 13 – David in all his Glory

In the fall I did visit Liv's home once when I helped to carry something heavy for her, what it was I can't remember. It was a few days after a parent sponsored potluck dinner so it might have been a heavy kitchen thing like a pot or china dish.

Liv had small hands and had trouble carrying large objects. If I were to meet her today, in middle age, she would probably be maybe 1 metre 6 and perhaps at most 100 kg. Yes, I know, lucky her!

When we arrived at her home I was about to hand the dish over and be on my way when she said "Now that you are here, why don't you come in for a visit." Her mother wasn't home when we got there and so she dug out the key from under the mat, opened the door and ushered me in. They were Italian and the house was strange and exotic to me. The House had an inviting smell of Italian and Mediterranean cooking.

We went into the kitchen first where Liv served up a big dish of spumoni ice cream which we both ate out of. Now tell me that's not romantic in a cute sort of way. We took the treat back to her room.

Her bedroom was neat and tidy (not like my room). On the back of her door was a poster of an Italian film starring Sophia Loren. There was a cross over her bed. The furniture was traditional white Italian.

Her bed had a white bedspread with frills (we were careful not to spill any ice cream on it). Her wardrobe was open and full of her dresses. She pull some things out from under her bed, plopped herself down on it and then began to show me some of the neat things that her aunts and uncles sent her from "the old country".

I remember especially a book of Italian art, which had paintings and sculptures of gods and goddesses. The book had landscape, architecture, portraits and figures all done by Michelangelo. When I saw a figure of a sculpture I flinched but she didn't bat an eye. I must have turned a bright red. It was the sculpture of David. I suddenly grew very self conscious.

"What's wrong?" she asked. I pointed at him.

"He's not wearing anything." "So". This was unexpected and awfully forward of her. My face got even redder. I looked up at the clock on her night table and rolled off her bed. "I have to go. My mother will be angry I am late."

I just stood there and she did not move for a moment. Then with a disappointed shrug she rolled onto her back and sprung to her feet. "Mama mi ah." She walked me to the front door with the book under her arm. Just as I turned to leave she offered me her art book. "You can borrow my book. Just give it back to me tomorrow at school."

I didn't want to prolong my stay or make things even more awkward then they were, so I opened my knapsack and she tucked the book in. "I am sorry … I have upset you." "You haven't upset me. I am embarrassed."

"Why are you embarrassed? It's just a sculpture. I have seen David you know. He's beautiful. "

I was tongue tied. I didn't know what to say. After a short pause she continued "there are some other beautiful pictures in the book. Tomorrow I will ask you which one you liked the best."

She leaned forward and then did something she had never done before. She kissed me on the cheek. I was surprised as she turned her cheek expecting a kiss in return. "You are suppose to kiss me back". A thought this must be an Italian thing. I kissed her on the cheek in return. I ran most of the way home and sure enough got into trouble for being nearly an hour late.

I tried to sneak in quietly but the trap had been set. My brother ran to tell my mother I was finally home. Well it was so good to have a brother who looked after his brat so well (brat by the way is Slavic for brother).

My mother came out from the kitchen were she had been toiling preparing our dinner. I was given the third degree and just as my knapsack was to be opened and its contents overturned all onto the

floor I ‘fessed up that I had stayed after school in the library until the librarian finally threw me out. There would be no checking of my story for the librarian and my mother had already had their fill of run ins and so I got off with a stern warning and a grounding that would last the rest of the week. “Straight home after school, and no dawdling.”

That night after dinner I excused myself to go to my room to do my homework. When I got to my room I left the door just ajar so I could hear anyone coming down the hallway (closing the door would have been too suspicious,) took out my home work and when I was certain the coast was clear took out the Michelangelo book. For at hour at least I was left undisturbed.

I careful flipped through the book and revelled on the majesty and grandeur of the art. When I got to David my face did not grow hot again. It was then that I think I understood that it was the context of the moment that saw me react the way I did.

Laying on her bed flipping through the drawings and pictures and then coming upon Michelangelo’s creation, which is candidly a tribute to manhood, that moment I felt as naked as David, being admired by Liv. I closed the book and wondered if she would feel the same way I did if we were to sit and admire a female form together.

The following day at recess we both went into the library and sat in a quiet corner. I took her book out of my bag and we started to talk and look at the pictures together. We got to the picture of David and she quickly looked at my face. I tried very hard but damn, she got me hot and bothered again. It was then that she asked me which picture I enjoyed the most.

I opened to one of the ceiling paintings in the Sistine Chapel, this one of a buxom women and pointing with a finger I said that I found this painting the most beautiful in the book. The uncovered woman was surrounded with little cherubs. I was turning the tables and sure enough her face went bright red. I guess she did feel the same way. That made me feel strangely warm and blissful on the inside.

Just then the bell rang. Without saying a sound she snatched back the book and we walked back to class without saying a thing. All afternoon we avoided speaking. Right after school Liv rushed off home. It was a Friday and so for all weekend I wondered what was up. Monday morning couldn't come fast enough.

That weekend I asked my mother about Michelangelo and Renaissance Art. She asked me why I was interested. I created a legend (made up a story) about an upcoming film on TV about Michelangelo, staring Charleton Heston.

As it would happen something had arrived in the mail the day before last and she went to get it. When she opened the box it was a brand

new copy of the Time-Life book on Leonardo da Vinci, which she handed to be. I dove into the book with a passion (I still have it in my collection and read it from time to time). Monday could not come fast enough.

On Monday Liv seemed to be her cheerful and exuberant self again, but more needy than usual that day. After school she asked me to walk home with her. I said I couldn't today but maybe in a few days. I told her that I had gotten into trouble for getting home late last week.

She seemed genuinely disappointed. "Maybe we can look at some more art together." I told her that I would like that. Every day that we week retired to our corner of the library during recess to enjoy some more renaissance art.

Everyday that week she also asked for me to walk her home and every time I had to say no. By Friday she had given up. Well in fact it turned out that I had to go "straight home after school, and no diddling" that week.

Girls, I know, like to be appreciated, but how far they wanted to be appreciated would take me more than just six years to figure out. Far more than six years. While it was the 1960's, I was naïve being a catholic boy and all, and frankly I wasn't in that great a hurry to grow up.

Jenn must have sensed something was up between Liv and I. Girls always do. It didn't take her long to find out. Liv opened up to Jenn and Jenn began to play games of her own.

I, on the other hand, was happy just to be appreciated for my mind, thank you. But girls will be girls, and they began to have whispered conversations with each other with me in the middle unavoidably listening in. They were evidently having fun at my expense. By this early age I had already learned to let some things roll down my back.

If you haven't already figured it out, Halloween is taken really seriously by children and don't you forget it. No one can safely come between a child and their entitlement for a sugar fix with a chocolate topping.

In October, starting with a shiver and ending with a huge belch we all prepared for Halloween. The conversation was dull to being with. The costumes of choice, witches, ghosts and other ghoulishness.

Until one day, just to be different, Jenn said she was going to dress up as Alice from Alice in Wonderland and Liv said she wanted to be her favourite actress … you guessed it, Sophia Loren.

By the following morning witches, ghosts and ghoulies were out and people, real or imaginary were in. In conspiratorial whispers we all traded our Halloween secrets and speculated on the hidden desires of our classmates.

I honestly can't remember what I dressed up as but I vaguely remember my bow tie and my little Macintosh checker vest was part of the outfit.

The Halloween party we had in our classroom was fun and our teacher well, I seem to remember she dressed as Pippy Longstockings. During the party we admired each other's outfits, although I my case they were probably being polite.

Alice from Wonderland, Sophia from Roma and I from the Borough of boring sat the games out.

We drank our hot chocolate (the real stuff not instant), ate our Rice Krispie squares (still one of my favourites) and

… made our peace.

Chapter 14 - On Remembrance Day I Try to Forget

November, was then and will always be about Remembrance Day for me. There were, in first grade, solemn stories that were read us, preparing us to be good Canadian citizens.

We made ornate and dignified poppies with earthy and appropriate colours (Lime Green was no where to be seen). We learned “In Flanders Field” by McCrae and studied the maps of Europe to see where all the tragedies happened. For the first time I told Liv and Jenn about my godfather, and the telegram and how I felt, and received a sympathetic hug from both my classmates.

These were our first tentative steps in good citizenship. These steps would take us on an epic trek up the road to meet real veterans. We did our civic duty the day before Remembrance Day when we had a school gathering for our ceremony and then afterwards our class walked to the old folks home up the street from our school to visit some veterans and their families and join then for tea and cookies.

It was a warm day and so I was dressed in a short sleeve white cotton shirt, short pants, my ubiquitous bow tie and Macintosh vest. If you could add a Charlie Brown head with protruding ears you would get the picture. I had strong bones and a hefty disposition when I was in first grade.

My mother still dressed me in Husky Jeans, which were fashionable at the time. Jeans, I would later find out, is what the P.O.W.'s and prisoners wore. How appropriate, don't you think. That day, however, I was not dressed like a prisoner, but like a perfect gentleman.

When we got to the old folks home we were welcomed like long forgotten nieces and nephews by strangers, some of who looked as old as dinosaurs. The oldest we were told before hand, had fought in the Great War of 1914-18, and some had fought in the Second World War. One man was blind (he had been gassed in 1915 over fifty years before) and several men were missing arms and limbs.

Until this day I had never seen people with missing limbs and so it was hard for me to look. I didn't quite turn away, but I also didn't come near. because I did not understand, as a little boy I was simply scared. With time my understanding would grow and my fears and ignorance lessen.

Off in the corner was a sad and lonely lady who stared unceasingly out the window. I walked over and stood beside her chair. It was a moment before she turned to acknowledge me. "Who are you" she asked.

I said nothing because I did not know what really to say. Instead I pointed to my teacher and my classmates. "Oh" she continued, "you must be from St. Brides." I nodded.

“I use to be a teacher once.” With that mention, I warmed to her and smiled. “What is your name son.”

“Patrick” I responded.

A smile broke across her sad face. “I’m Irish you know. What’s you last name.” Things looked promising.

“Bruskiewich” I said.

In a flash and with a loud flurry she bellowed “That’s not an Irish name!” I was startled and my eyes started to tear.

In a flash, our Principal rushed over and wrenched me by the arm. “What has the boy done now.” His powerful grip on my arm hurt me. My teacher had by now turned and some of my classmates as well.

Tears were flowing down my cheeks, but not from the pain of her words, but from the pain of the Principal’s wretched grasp. I squirmed and tried to break free but he just held me ever more tightly.

Then the unexpected happen. The elderly lady looked direction into my principals eyes, gave him the evil stare and firmly retorted “Unhand the boy!” The Principal instantly let me go. I could feel the blood once again flow down my arm to my hand and fingers.

She wagged her finger at him. “I thought I taught you better manners!. “ Meekly he responded, “Yes Miss”.

The old battleaxe continued. “Fetch the lad and I some tea and a biscuit and then let us be.”

My jaw hit the floor. In some sense she was the embodiment of the nightmare elementary school teacher. Old school. Principled. A strict disciplinarian!

My Principal did what he was told. The elderly lady leaned over and quietly confided in me “I was his teacher when he was your age. He was quite a handful you know.” I could swear she blinked at me. But maybe a battleaxe for a teacher isn’t all that bad!

There was an empty chair next to her and she motioned for me to pull it closer and sit. In “*Patrick Fashion*” I pushed and it made a loud noise as it was inched along the floor.

Almost on queue the Principal returned with my cup of tea and not one, not two, but three peek freen cookies, the special ones with the strawberry filling! I was in heaven. Instead of handing it to me he carefully placed it on the round little table next to us, doily and all.

She pointed to my arm. “Shame on you. Look at that. He is going to have a bruise on his arm.”

Then another miracle. The Principal meekly responded. “I am so sorry Miss. I thought he was bothering you.”

“You know this young man reminds me a lot of you at his age.” I knew without looking up that the Principal was peering down over me. I did not look up.

I was meekly dunking one of the cookies in the tea and filling my mouth so I would not have to speak. What in the world could I have really said to what was transpiring, except perhaps that I couldn’t believe it.

“Shew” she said waving her hand and like a dutiful lad the Principal walked away. I dunked the last of cookie in the tea and nibbled. By now I had put crumbs all down the front of my vest and short pants.

“Look at you. Stand up and brush the crumbs off.” I careful set the tea cup down on the table stood and brushed the crumbs off me onto the floor.

“Tsk, Tsk … don’t they teach you anything at school? In my day and age we would carefully gather the crumbs in a hand and then just put them back on the plate. Otherwise the mice would visit the parlour and feast.”

I bent down and started to pick up the crumbs. "Leave it. They will come and they will sweep them up."

I stood back up and asked her "Didn't they have vacuums when you were young?"

"No we didn't have electricity till 1916. Sold the farm and moved to the city that year."

I sat back down and settled in. "Why did you move?"

"My husband had gone off and enlisted. He left my son and I to manage the farm all by ourselves. In 1916 my husband died in the Great War and so I had to sell our farm and move to the city. "

"Couldn't your son help."

"He was only two when his father died. I wrote my husband many times and sent him a few picture of his son but I never found out if he ever received my letters. I never received anything back from him. Then one day a letter arrived from Ottawa saying my husband was missing and presumed dead. They never found his body."

In later years when I saw pictures of the Western Front, and the mud, gore, and morass of the first world war I would hear her voice as this elderly and lonely said … *They never found his body*.

“Isn’t your son coming to visit you today?”

“My son was a pilot in world war two. He flew Lancaster bombers. He went missing over Germany in 1944. They never found his plane. This time I received a telegram that my son was missing and presumed dead.”

I sat silently with my tea cup on my lap. I was looking down into the depths of the cup very sad of what I had just heard.

She seemed to read my thought. “On Remembrance Day I try to forget.” I looked up at her and she looked so lonely, so old and so sad.

“Miss … I lost my godfather in 1965 …” I proceeded to tell her my story as best I could. When I finished she seemed better off to have heard my story. Or so a small boy would wish.

“You know”, she said, “ you are wearing the Bruce Tartan. I imagine that Bruskiewich means son of Bruce.”

I was all ears as she told me the story of Robert of Bruce, of the Scottish and Irish Bruces, of Wellington and Michael of Bruce, Lord Durham, of James of Bruce a past Governor General of Canada … of Lord Elgin … in short order my head was spinning and she then stopped.

I looked at her, completely amazed about both the story and how fine a story teller she was. I had always thought that as people grow older they became forgetful. This was not dinosaur. This was an encyclopaedia.

From across the room the clarions called and our visit was coming to an end. Before I knew it we wee little lads and lasses were being rounded up, set in pairs and marched on our way back to our class room and then home.

The elder teacher insisted she walk with me to the door. I made a motion to want to whisper something in her ear. She bent down and before she could respond I had planted a kiss oh her cheek.

“Oh my” she said, “no student has ever done that.” She turned to the Principal and continued “look after this lad. If I hear you are bullying him I will have you across my knee lickety split.”

The Principal had no choice but to stand there and take it like a man from his old school teacher.

Every Remembrance Day since I have returned as a young boy to where I was that November of 67.

Chapter 15 – Christmas ‘67

Christmas time was quickly approaching and we had to contend with a blistering cold winter. At school the artwork turned from turkeys to sleigh bells and we all began to rehearse the repertoire expected of us at the Christmas concert.

There was a bravado we all shared in the classroom amongst our classmates while we practiced for our Christmas pageantry. And the Pageant, well it went as best as pageants can go. Sort of like a Charlie Brown kind of thing. Oh … and that was around the time of the then new Peanuts Christmas Television program and it swept us little ones off our feet. Today it’s a classic which I always enjoy seeing.

The new addition to the family, a little girl, was healthy, quiet and content. Over the summer the front room had been converted into a baby’s room and it opened to my parent’s bathroom and in turn their bedroom. It was a quiet corner of a normally rambunctious and loud household.

Next room over from the baby’s room was the entrance to our house, then the atrium and there was an old black and white Philips television set. We took to turning the volume down and sitting closer to the set so as not to disturb the newborn.

For the first time we would venture forth across town to get a large Christmas tree. In previous years we would just drive up the street. This Christmas season was special.

There was a new baby in the family and a big plump tree was very much appropriate. There were a few extra special gifts to put under the tree. How do you wrap up so many counted blessing and wishful thoughts?

The boys were sent on the trek. We decided on a tree that was so large we could not put it onto the roof of the car and so we had to stick it out the back window of our station wagon and drive home in the frigid cold, car exhaust and all through the freshly falling snow.

The drive back home that day seemed to take longer than other drives, partly because of the last minute Christmas shoppers and partly because of the cold winter weather. The roads were full of ice and snow and the tires at spots could hardly find the traction. Sure, everything was being salted and sanded but mother nature always triumphs over the best laid plays and earnest efforts of man.

When we finally got home that evening we struggled to take the tree up the narrow path way flanked on both sides by the shovelled snow and when we finally got the silly think in the house we were cold, miserable and no longer in the spirit of the season and so in good Canadian fashion we dropped everything and watched a hockey game, Montreal versus who we didn't care. And there was hot chocolate

with marshmallows to defrost our little fingers. I was disappointed I had missed bugs bunny, but it was worth it.

When we had warmed up enough we all helped to place this goliath of a tree on its stand and keep it from tipping. We were probably past the safe loading of the small and not straining green and red tree stand (my job was to keep the tree watered) and then with a real and perceptible twang the string was cut and the silly thing sprang open as if to mock us.

It was a lot larger inside our atrium than it seemed outside in the dim light of the Knights of Columbus tree lot across town, just across the street from the Catholic Cathedral. As I looked up in amazement, the decision was made, next year we would all go Christmas tree buying … kind of a practical solution to the tree size issue.

If we all came the tree would have to go onto the roof, because the car would be full of family and therefore it could only be so large!

We decorated the tree the next day and by that evening the night before Christmas, we were all set to celebrate. Then, as if on queue it started to snow again … the large flaked White Christmas snow. Bing was probably wishing it on us.

As I looked out the frosted windows I thought … more shovelling ahead for me.

On Christmas Eve we all went to church, which was packed and quite a lot of fun. I saw some of my classmate and we sort of, kind of , really tried not to get too interested in each other. It was an unwritten rule I guess. There was the world of school, and there was everything else. Even though it was Christmas mass, it was still part of that everything else world

Then after mass we brushed the fresh snow off the car, started it and let it warm up a bit, then instead of truning left at the intersection and returned from whence we came, we turned right and drove to an uncle's home where we gathered for Christmas dinner.

Our uncle had a large catholic family of nine children and was then chief surgeon at Edmonton General Hospital. His house was large enough to hold the sixty or so family and friends gathered that evening.

Christmas dinner ... well imagine cooking from the old country, in this case Poland, done by women from the old country, in this case the grandmothers!

And while the women were in the kitchen, the men were in the living room toasting out the old year and ushering in the new.

And we kids, well, we were everywhere and always underfoot. There were so many of us we had to sit at four tables set up in the living

room and the little ones were at the kitchen table now cleared of food because it had been set out.

And what food! Borscht, cucumber salad, pickles, head cheese in vinegar, sauerkraut, perogies, sausages, roast duck, roast beef, horseradish, cabbage rolls mashed potatoes, carrots in butter … And for desert, poppy seed cake, marzipan, Christmas cookies, ginger bread men and freshly made ice cream. I know I have left some food off the list.

I bet you mouth is watering. Mine is.

After the tables were cleared there were some congratulatory messages passed around the room and some gifts opened by all then it was time to go (usually around 2:00 am).

After a feast like that, to drive home and tuck yourself into bed … what else was there to do. Opening Christmas gifts would have to wait until long after day break.

My guess was, that was part of the plan.

Ho Ho Ho

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